The Solid Rock

The Third Sunday in Lent 2020

Matthew 7:7-12, 24-29

*Everybody who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise builder who built a house on bedrock.*

 *Matthew 7:24, The Common English Bible*

 Grace and peace to you from God and our Lord Jesus Christ. I must confess that this is a bittersweet moment for me on this occasion, my last Sunday as your pastor and teacher, albeit in an interim role. It is much more so, since I have felt God’s leadership to make this my last interim ministry. Some of you have asked what next. I don’t know, to tell you the truth. When one has done something for over fifty years, it’s hard to conceive of another path. I have left the door open for occasional preaching engagements when called, so I will not completely leave ministry behind. I hope to pick up some unfinished manuscripts and maybe write some, but I don’t want to do that for a while. But it’s time. Let us pray: *God of our sunset years, enable our hearts to be filled with deep gratitude for what has been, fully engaged with the present moment, and embracing with excitement for all you have in store for the future. Amen.*

The Bible, the book of our faith, offers us many examples of final moments. King David, for example, knowing the end was near for him, called those closest to him, and shared his mana’o with them individually. Moses, having spoken with God and knowing he would not make the final leg of the journey into the promised land with the people, gathered them and gave them the Law. Elijah placed the prophet’s mantle upon his disciple Elisha and disappeared into the clouds on a chariot. And, of course, there is Jesus, who, according to John, gathered his disciples and shared his final thoughts and teachings. The apostle Paul took pen to paper and wrote to his young mentee Timothy: *. . .the time of my death is near. I have fought the good fight, I finished the race, I have kept the faith. At last the champion’s wreath that is awarded for righteousness is waiting for me.* That’s a pretty high bar, one to which I don’t pretend to aspire. I am not at death’s doorstep, at least not that I know of.

 And yet there are things I want to say. Some of these things I will say in the litany of farewell to come at the end of this service. But there is a bit more.

 I did depart from my usual discipline of preaching from the common lectionary in closing out this last month of ministry here. If you have been here over the past month, you know that I have tried to share my thoughts on the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5-7. I have done so because I firmly believe that it contains the key to living faithfully as a follower of Jesus Christ.

I wish I had more time to dwell on the parts I have omitted, for it contains much of what I believe is crucial to living out a faithful life. But so be it.

 But now we come to Jesus’ concluding thoughts on what he has just taught. It can be summarized quite simply in the three familiar words of the sporting goods manufacturer: *Just do it.* Jesus observes that it is important, not only to take in all that he has taught, but to put them into practice. If you do that, he teaches, you will be like the wise builder who built his house on a solid foundation. If you do so, it will withstand all the vagaries of time and circumstance. The typhoons of doubt may do its best to tear the house of faith from its foundation. The tornadoes of physical pain and serious illness may seek to erode the ground on which your life is built. But if you learn the ways of Jesus as he teaches, not as an intellectual exercise, but truly learn it in your heart, and live by what you understand to be truth, it will withstand the tests of time that will surely come in each and every one of our lives.

 Building such a foundation is simple, but it is not easy. Simple because it is encapsulated into two repeating steps: learn and do.

 Learning and doing is not a one-and-done experience. It is a lifelong process. This is a lesson that was taught us by our South American Christians, as they formed what is known as base communities. Base communities were small groups of Christians who committed to grow together as Christians, meeting regularly to study their faith and committing to put their faith into practice in their daily lives. The Bible and putting into practice what it teaches was their only source of learning. They would gather weekly, studying and reflecting on the Bible and what it was like putting it into practive. As they tried to live out what they learned, they would regather and share their experiences, their struggles, their victories. They would support each other, pray for one another, love one another. It was and continues to be an empowering and liberating way of life. And it is what Jesus intended in his teaching here. They were building that strong foundation that Jesus was getting at. Stone by stone, you build your faith. Learn and then do what you learn.

 I believe Nu’uanu Congregational Church needs to offer this small community of faith opportunities beyond Sunday mornings to have these kind of learning experiences. You should seek as a goal to have as many members of the congregation as possible to participate in this model of growing and maturing as Christians.

 Nu’uanu Congregational Church has a small cadre of members who have taken on the mantle of leadership in the congregation. They often play musical chairs, exchanging one hat of leadership for another, simply switching roles. But often they approach or experience burnout. Their energy flags. They feel spiritually exhausted. They seek desperately to find people to replace themselves. They often take the “warm body” approach, i.e. if the person has a pulse, they qualify to take on a committee or officer position. And in this phenomenon, Nu’uanu is not alone. This holds true for more congregations than we can count.

 Persons who have researched and studied this burnout of leaders have come to one basic conclusion: persons who most likely reach this point more than likely are ignoring their own spiritual growth. They are not doing as Jesus teaches here.

 And so, these are my parting words: build your lives, build this church’s life, on the strong foundation of learning and doing. It is as old as time, as simple as kindergarten, and as profound as the deepest sea. And it is my prayer for you.