

In the Gospel reading this morning, Jesus compared faith in him to a wise man that built his house on rock. The rain and winds came, but the house stood firm. A neighbor that built his house upon the sand lost it all in the first good storm. Anyone who lives in a hurricane-prone area of the country knows the wisdom of building with steel-reinforced concrete and tying that concrete firmly to bedrock. In many hurricane-prone areas, that is required by the building code. There actually is a parallel to this in today's Gospel, and it just happens to be ancient Roman building code.

This metaphor in Matthew's Gospel is based on an observation of sturdy buildings built to Roman government specifications. This story, deriving from the now lost "Q" or "*Quella*" source, probably originated in the region of Antioch. Antioch was near the Mediterranean Sea and Antioch was a strong point of early Christian activity. Antioch was an important city in the extended Roman Empire; unfortunately, an earthquake fault line ran right through it. Shortly before the Christian era, a quake destroyed much of the city. The Romans rebuilt with stone anchored deep into the ground. The new buildings might not have been strong enough to withstand a major earthquake, but they sure stood up to the fierce storms for which the region was equally noted. Their survival rate, during severe storms was much better than the older clay and wooden houses set without foundation. The durability of this new construction method was certainly not lost on the local population. Houses built on stone were built to last.

It is not amazing, then, that early Christians used this imagery to talk about solid faith. Faith built on solid rock passes the tests of life. Faith built on sand, superficial faith, often will collapse at the first of life's challenges. We pride ourselves on being thinking people, not afraid to apply the tests of reason to our Christian doctrine, not afraid to accept the advances and insights of science and academic discovery and hold them up to ancient teachings and the words of Holy Scripture. Simply put, we believe that truth cannot overturn God if God is ultimate truth. We have little empathy and certainly not sympathy for those who insist that faith must be blind to intelligence, to insight, knowledge and reason, but none the less we want a solid faith that stands firm against life's challenges.

How does one build a solid faith, a faith built upon a foundation of solid rock? First, one builds it carefully over time. Solid faith is a result of years of the experience of God, in things great and small. It is the result of much deliberate and intentional prayer. It is a result of knowing biblical teachings, but not accepting them blindly. Rather, a truly biblical faith must look to study and reason and reach beyond the surface to see the truth in the depths.

When you pray, study and worship in the Christian community, then, gradually, you begin to see a pattern. You see this pattern in your experiences of God that you've taken the time to reflect upon, thinking and reasoning your way to understanding. These things become your building blocks, as you apply your understanding to life's experiences. You

begin to see the same pattern recorded in the biblical experiences of God by the ancients, who also thought about their experiences and reasoned out an understanding. These experiences are recorded in the Bible's stories. The same is true in the traditions of generations of Christians in the post-biblical era that find themselves incorporated in the doctrine and discipline of the Church. You understand that the pattern that emerges has passed the test of time. It is a pattern of righteousness, justice and mercy that does not prejudge, that does not discriminate and that applies to each of life's decisions a single measure, "What do I honestly think Jesus would do, given his knowledge of these present circumstances?" Or, in other words of the same meaning, "What is the loving thing right here and now? What would I do if I was truly loved my neighbor as I love myself?"

And when you have learned to turn to God and learned to trust God to show you the loving way and to be with you on that pathway of righteousness, justice and mercy, then you will realize that your faith is solid because ultimately faith is nothing more than trust in God, trust that God will be ever righteous, ever just, ever merciful and always loving. You have a faith built upon the rock. It is a faith that will last. It is a faith that can stand up against life's storms. It is a faith that gives you courage in the face of danger, hope in the face of trouble, strength to carry on. It is faith built solidly on Jesus. *Amen.*

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