

HOW FIRM A FOUNDATION
Rev. Bruce J. Roffey
King City United Church
York United Ministries
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Quite a few years ago in a list of Scripture readings for wedding celebrations I saw one I had never used and never expected to see. It's the one we heard this morning, a story most of us remember from childhood. There were two people. One built his house on sand and when the storms hit that house was washed away. The other built his house on rock, a firm foundation, and when the storms hit the house withstood.¹

When people choose this reading for their wedding, what they are saying is that they want their marriage to rest upon a firm foundation so that it will last, so that it will withstand the storms of life which are inevitable and unavoidable, so that their house, their home, their family, their future will be successful, reliable, strong, dependable, and I must say happy.

Don't we all want that? Not just for our marriages but for all life. We need a firm foundation.

Much has been made lately about the differences between the generations. Those differences exist and they are strong. I experience them all the time. The generations are different. They seek different goals, value different principles, but underlying it all is the same need for something solid upon which to build their lives, something that will give them a positive sense of identity, something that will motivate them, something that will direct and guide their actions and living, something that will make them feel good.

Do we ever really get over this search for identity? I don't think so. The journey to discover who we are never ends. We change, all of us, as we experience more of life, as the world changes, as we understand more, or perhaps realize that we really understand less.

Where then can we find this firm foundation to undergird our identity and guide our search for it, upon which to build our lives, in which we can trust? I think we've looked a lot of places and found

those foundations to be like shifting sands.

I think it's true that many of us of my generation have looked to institutions for security and stability. They have failed us. Governments and political parties have not enacted what many of us believed about how a society, our society, should work and what values it should hold dear. Poll after poll reveals little confidence in our political system and, unfortunately, the people who serve within it. We have been led astray and let down too many times.

I know that I have always looked to the church, but it too has been found lacking. Although mystically it is the body of Christ, institutionally it is a human society and with it has all the foibles, all the politics, all the weaknesses of human beings. And I know that because I am part of it; I am part of the problem. But I am also part of the solution, and I will continue to believe in the church and to work so that increasingly this earthly, human community might become more and more the colony of heaven it was meant to be and the flesh and blood incarnation of the mystical body of Christ. Still the church itself, as much as I love it, is not the foundation upon which we can stand.

When I was a young man, we trusted science. The progress being made in science in the 20th century was almost unimaginable and continues to be even more so. I was reading one of the newsletters from the University of Toronto Physics Department, *Interactions*, which updated we alumni on recent developments in research and new initiatives, and frankly I didn't understand very much of it. It spoke about computer systems "which will consist of Beowulf architectures but which will be complementary in terms of their levels of parallelism." It spoke about string theory, compactifying 6 of the 10 dimensions, D-branes, particles at sub-Planckian energies and quantum gravity. The only thing that seemed familiar was an article with questions from the Graduate Examination on statistical mechanics and wave mechanics, but it was from 1937!

Science is making great strides much of which actually has impact on our daily lives as technology uses these advances to change even the mundane, ordinary activities we do every day. But science and technology have not proven to be the firm foundation of our lives. We now recognize that much of our optimism was simply

scientism, the philosophical system that holds that science has all the answers. Scientism is just another faith system worshipping yet another small 'g' god.

Science has not only failed to provide answers, to invoke meaning, to offer a firm foundation, it has produced deep ethical questions which do not have scientific answers, questions which shake the foundations, questions especially in biology, genetic manipulation, cloning and such areas.

Think also about this. Many of us are dealing with aging parents, or perhaps are aging parents. So, we are intimately acquainted with the great advances that are being made in medical science, but they have muddied our thinking about death, and about life.

Those who study dying, death and grief has been saying for a long time that we are a death-denying society. The boomers, it has been lampooned, are the first generation who didn't believe we would die. Death has been taken out of the home, out of the family and hidden behind curtains and medical equipment in hospitals, and in funeral homes, which despite the good work done there, are not homes. Thank God for caregivers who make it possible for the weak and dying to remain as long as possible in homes with families and for the hospice movement that is trying to put humanity and dignity back into dying by accompanying the dying and their families on this last stage of life. And thanks be to God as well that gradually people of faith are moving the funerals of their loved ones back to the sanctuary of God, both literally and figuratively, so that we can draw upon the resources of God that give us strength in the storm, resiliency, rebirth and hope.

This, you see, is where the firm foundation is found, in God, in God's word, in God's word made flesh in Jesus Christ, his words and life, and in his Spirit who flows out from those words and into us.

"Whoever hears these words of mine and does them will be like the wise person who built his house upon the rock." "These words of mine and your response will be your firm foundation." "How firm a foundation, you servants of God, is laid for your faith in God's excellent word!"ⁱⁱ

Listen to these words, Jesus says, and make them your own.

Why? Because they are authoritative. Those who heard Jesus speak were astonished, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as others who have let us down, but as one who has authority.ⁱⁱⁱ

This passage ends the section of Matthew's gospel called the Sermon on the Mount.^{iv} In the Sermon on the Mount, the author of Matthew has taken Jesus' teachings and combined them, synthesized them into one substantial work of teaching. This passage also, however, introduces the next section in chapters 8 and 9 in which Jesus doesn't just speak but puts his words into action. He heals people. He calms a great storm at sea. He calls a disrespected tax collector, Matthew, to be an apprentice and follower. He eats with sinners and reveals the inclusiveness of God's reign. He raises a little girl from apparent death. And as he opened the eyes of the blind to see so he opens ours to see and to know.

Jesus' life becomes the teacher because it is founded upon the firm foundation of his words. In his actions we see his authority revealed.

Likewise, if our life is founded upon the firm foundation of Jesus' words, our actions should reveal his authority. "Listen to these words, and act upon them." It isn't enough just to see the bedrock. We must build our house upon it and sink our footings into it. It isn't just the foundation that must be strong. The building needs to be strong. We need to exercise our faith, not just to make it strong but to understand it through experience. You learn about Jesus by walking with him. You learn about God's love by yourself loving. You learn about the Holy Spirit by opening yourself to the Spirit. What has been learned in the holy place needs to be taken to the marketplace. Lip service must become life service. Our view of life needs to be harmonized with our way of life.

This is what I call answering the so-what question of faith. You say you believe in God? So what? What does that mean? You say you believe in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit? So what? What difference does it make? You say you believe in the church, in the communion of saints, in the forgiveness of sins, in the resurrection of the body, in the life everlasting? So what? What does it mean to

you, to who you are, to how you live?

When I am preparing a Bible study or writing a sermon, that is the most important question to me, so what? What does this reading which we say is the word of God, what does it mean for the 21st century and for these people? How can it be a firm foundation for our lives?

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the Canadian religious scholar, says that we need to rediscover the meaning of the word "believe". It has come to mean "to have an opinion about something" or "to think something." However, it comes from the same roots as the German "belieben" which means to love. Believing is rooted in love.

The word "creed" comes from the word "credo" meaning to believe. Credo, however, comes from a root which also gives us other words like cardiac. It means to give your heart, to trust. A creed is something to which you give your heart, something you trust, something you love.

"Hear these words of mine and act upon them," Jesus says. It means that they must be more than opinions but part of who you are residing in your heart. Trust them because you trust the one who spoke them. Give your heart to Jesus' way because you have given your heart to him. Follow in his way because you love him, - and he loves you.

Is this really though the firm foundation we can trust, which won't let us down? Surely, we all must wonder about that when we see Jesus in front of the rock-hard strength of Rome ending on the rock of Calvary.

Why do you think the words of Jesus were recorded? Because they are nice words? Because they have a pleasant sound to them? Because there is a sense of poetry in them? No, it's because they ring true. It's because there is a sense of reality about them. The gospel of Matthew comes out of the second century church. It was assembled by people who had built their lives upon this firm foundation, had experienced the storms and had not been struck down. The foundation had held, and the house withstood. It was unshakeable.

Similarly, the creeds were not an intellectual, abstract exercise

but an effort to express what they knew to be true, to express the wisdom from and truth about Jesus in written form, so that people after them, so that we, could also know the truth. From the experiences of their own living, they knew that his words were the law of heaven and that they would bring great blessing. They would reveal the world as it really was and underpin our lives. They would reveal our true selves, our true identity. They would show us the way, motivate us to live it and direct our paths. James writes, "A person who listens to the message but never acts upon it is like one who looks in a mirror at his natural face. He glances at himself and goes away, and at once forgets what he looked like."^v

In the words of Jesus, and his actions illustrating those words, we discover our true identity. As his words become our wisdom, we find God. We find food to fulfil our hunger. We find living water to quench our thirst and refresh our being. We find purpose, meaning, satisfaction and fulfilment. And we find a firm foundation we can trust for our security. That is truly good news. "How firm a foundation, you servants of God, is laid for your faith in God's excellent word!" Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 7: 24-27.

ⁱⁱ *Voices United*, Hymn 660, "How Firm a Foundation," words by "K" in John Rippon's *A Selection of Hymns* (1787).

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 7: 28-29.

^{iv} Matthew 5: 1 – 7: 27.

^v James 1: 23-24.