

## How firm a foundation

A sermon preached by the Rev. Robert B. Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts on June 1, 2008, the Third Sunday after Pentecost.

*Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.*  
Matthew 7:24

It happens every spring. How well we remember the trauma of college applications and the relief we felt when the acceptance package arrives. It was just as bad going through it with our children as it was for us. I well remember the feeling of intimidation at one college interview with our daughter where we were told that if they only considered applications from class valedictorians, they still could only accept a limited number. Those students who do their best in academics, sports, class leadership and community service know they can't assume anything about getting into college. They will never regret their hard work.

Jesus tells us not to assume anything about God's grace and mercy. We can't get by with just giving lip service. From time to time people want to use the church for family occasions without being active or supportive of the church. To attend only when it is convenient and to expect the church to be available for personal occasions is to presume on God's grace and the good will of the church.

When we pray in our opening collect to God "from whom no secrets are hid," we are reminded that God alone knows our innermost intentions and motives. Sincere faith is not paying mere lip service, but working at developing and testing our own faith and living out in our lives what we say we believe. We can try to fool people, we can try to fool ourselves, but we certainly can't fool God.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer lamented about what he called "cheap grace." Too often people look for forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, absolution without confession. It is cheap grace if we are not committed to taking up our cross and following Christ. God's grace is costly because our forgiveness was won at the expense of Christ giving his life as an example for us.

In Jesus' parable of the two houses, one is built on sand and the other on rock. The two houses may appear to be sturdy and well built, but the foundation of the one on the rock is strong and firm while the other built on sand can be easily washed away. If our lives resemble a house built on sand, everything might appear to be strong and sturdy, but when we encounter trouble, the weak foundation of our character washes away. Our character, like the house built on solid rock, must be sturdy enough to endure the storm of tough moral and ethical issues in our business and personal life.

The best way to build a strong foundation of character is to align our will with God's will by imitating Christ, making his life our life. St. Paul tells us that we come to God by our faith. In the letter of James we learn that our faith must also be reflected in how we live. Both emphasize that we come to God by our faith as reflected in how we live it. We must not only hear God's Word, but must also act on it in our lives. If we say we love God but have no love for other people, our faith is in vain. There must be evidence of our faith in the way we live our lives. Not only must we mean what we say we believe, we must also learn to do the right thing for the right reason. That is what makes Christian love a verb as well as a noun.

Our mission as a community of faith is to have opportunities for putting our faith to work. Whatever we do to help others must be motivated by our love for them. Christian love demands that we seek the good of others ahead of ourselves. Ultimately, the judgment of the quality of character is up to God whose love for us is unconditional. We are judged on our motives as well as our achievements, on our faithfulness rather than our success.

It is said that Christianity is the most materialistic of all world religions because we affirm the material world while emphasizing the spiritual. The issues of how we spend money, our ownership of material possessions, our use of power, resolving disputes, and the way we treat others involve the realm of politics, ethics, and faith. We cannot put such important issues in neatly separate boxes.

Applying our Christian faith in the real world begins way deep down inside of us. History has proved that Christianity can and does make a difference when applied in the marketplace as well as in the home. We have the power to be vessels for the outpouring of God's love in the world. We have the potential for doing great good in the world as well as for doing great harm. The choice is up to us.

An illustration of self-giving love is set in the sacred land of our spiritual ancestors. On a trip to the Holy Land, were in a boat on the Sea of Galilee. The fresh waters of the Sea of Galilee in the north provide green growth along its shores with an abundance of fish and wildlife. Those waters flow south into the Jordan River down 1500 feet below sea level to the lowest point on earth into the Dead Sea. There the salt and mineral deposits preclude any fish or plant life. The air hangs heavily over the Dead Sea which cannot sustain life of any kind.

One body of water receives fresh water and passes it on while the other keeps what it receives and cannot sustain life. One is alive and gives much while the other receives but gives nothing back. So it is with God's grace: what we receive, we must give back for the benefit of others.

The English Bishop John A.T. Robinson in his popular book: *Honest to God*, written in the early 1960's, asserted that the church is not an organization for religious people; rather it is a charter for all of us to serve the world. More important than who gets the credit is who gets the benefit. It requires a firm foundation for giving ourselves as servants to God's people and to God's world.