

Life's Foundations

The Rev. William R. Rich

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In my childhood, about this time of the year, my mind would turn from the rocky hillsides of West Virginia where I was being raised and would move to the sandy seashore at the beach in Delaware where my family spent two weeks every summer. Maybe you know what it's like to shuttle between rocky solid foundations and sandy foundations. Not necessarily in geography but in the shape of your life.

In the words that we just heard from Jesus in the Gospel, Jesus is not giving us an engineering lesson. We know that houses can fall because of earthquakes even in places of solid foundations, like the solid ground of Sichuan Province in China. They can fall just as easily there as they do on the sandy shores of the Irrawaddy Delta in Myanmar when a cyclone hits. But it's not an engineering lesson that Jesus is giving us, rather, by using houses and foundations as metaphors, Jesus is asking us a question. Where have you and I sunk the foundations of our lives? What have we built our lives upon? Now, let me begin by admitting that I know far more about building sand castles than I do about laying foundations on solid rock. In literal terms, I have never laid the foundation of a house built on solid ground, but in literal terms I know quite a bit about the delight of quick construction and the sadness and quick melting away of sand castles. Virtually every afternoon of my summer days in Rehoboth Beach, Delaware, I built at least one sand castle at the water's edge, and just as regularly I watched the waves and the tides unmake what I had so enthusiastically built.

Christ is using, in the lesson we just heard, a metaphor for where we sink the foundations of our lives. He is suggesting, not in literal words but in everything that he says and does, that he himself, his words, his actions, are not only the foundation but are the cornerstone of the foundation of our lives, that that is the only way to build solidly. Now you are used to hearing that the Christ is the solid rock, we have hymns that sing it, we have words from scripture that tell it, but what does that mean? In what way, in what way is Christ the solid rock, the cornerstone of our lives? You're used to hearing it said that Jesus is God's love made flesh and that that's the foundation on which we build. Nice to hear, but what does it mean? What does it mean to build a foundation on the love of God made known to us in Jesus Christ? Try this idea out as a way of fleshing it out, if you will. Perhaps in Jesus God is declaring to us, I will do whatever it takes to know you and let you know me. I'll do whatever it takes to love you and to help you love me. I will not let anything get in the way of loving, I won't let sin, I won't let evil, I won't let fear or doubt, I won't let any power dissuade me from loving you and working with you so that you will come to love me so that we may know and love one another.

What a wonderful place to build a foundation that kind of love, or is it? Love's messy business, for God to love us day in, day out, moment in and moment out; to let nothing dissuade God from loving us has to be messy business for God, because we're messy

people with messy lives, we're not always lovable, are we? So what is this solid foundation, this solid foundation of loving? Many of us decide it's so messy that we would rather choose another foundation, another cornerstone, say success? Our declaration, as opposed to God's, is I will do whatever it takes to make myself a success. I won't let love, love of family, love of friends; I won't let my colleagues get in my way. I won't let morality get in my way; I'll do whatever it takes to succeed. I will be a success. Neater, more solid, or at least so it seems to many of us. The messiness of loving as a foundation, the seeming of solidity of success...

To sharpen this, let me tell a story about someone who seemed to make the Christ the foundation at first, but whose life had ups and downs, rather like ours. Because you see there's a paradox in this morning's lesson, did you hear it? It's not just saying Lord, Lord, or even doing actions in the name of Jesus that makes a solid foundation — we can deceive ourselves. To do the will of God is not necessarily just to say Lord, Lord, or to do what we think is Jesus' will. It's sometimes more complicated than that, sometimes the solid foundation looks, from the outside, as if we are building on Jesus, but eventually it shows up as something else, perhaps building on our own self-made success.

The story: there was a man raised in the south who had almost nothing as he was being raised up, but by sheer force of will raised himself up, made a life as a real estate mogul and by 29 was a multi-millionaire. He claimed that it all came from faith in Jesus. He seemed to be one of those who said, Lord, Lord and was doing the actions that Christ calls for. But at the same time he was making himself a success he notice that his life was becoming dogged by illness and eventually his integrity was being ruined by unfaithfulness in his marriage and less than fully honest business dealings. One day on the way to one of those real estate deals, in a taxi, he had one of those moments of revelation and conversion that happens in peoples' lives. Sometimes in a flash as it did for him, but for most of us usually more slowly as we notice the foundation we've built on isn't necessarily as sacred or solid as we had thought it was. He asked the driver to turn around to take him home and he made a clean breast of things with his wife, told her what had been going on. She forgave him and together they decided that they would give up their fortune, give it to the poor and try to lead a different kind of life. They went and joined a communal community in Georgia call the Koinonia Foundation where they lived, white and black together, formerly rich and poor together and they tried to live the truth of the Gospel in community. They studied scripture together and from that time he and his wife formed a picture of a mission, an action, a true action to take in the name of Christ. They went for three years to what was then Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo and they built houses. The vision that they had had was that no one needed to live in a shack. The man's name is Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity. He and his wife came back after that three year experiment in Zaire to try it out here. And for 29 years he was the leader of Habitat for Humanity, building houses all over this country and all over the world. You'd think that my sermon could stop there and I could have a nice, neat wrap up by saying, You see, what he thought was a solid foundation turned out not to be, it turned out to have shifting sands and he chose again the Christ as a solid foundation and all was well. But as many of us know, I would say, all of us know, choosing to return to Christ as a foundation doesn't necessarily make the

shifting sands go away. Things don't all become neat and solid at every moment simply by returning to Christ. Fuller found that out.

In the early 1990's he was accused by five women in the business of Habitat for Humanity of being sexually inappropriate with them. There was never any proof. Habitat disciplined him for one year and then things seemed to go on. In 2005, another accusation was made and they fired him as president. The shifting sands of picking something other than Christ as a foundation keep creeping in. You know that, I know that.

To return to Christ as a foundation is not to make our lives, nice, solid neat. It is to join Christ in the messiness of loving. To join Christ there means, yes, that the love of God in Jesus Christ is a solid cornerstone, but next to it are built too other stones, not so neat, solid but not so neat. The first is mercy, mercy towards oneself and others because of those shifting sands that keep moving us away from the foundation stone. But mercy can bring us back as we will find as we come to this table of mercy in just a few moments. Mercy will bring us back, back to the foundation of loving as Christ loves, which is not a neat business. What's the other foundation stone, on the other side of the foundation stone of loving? The other is to keep turning outward into the world in action, never to give up, never to be discouraged by those shifting sands. Notice that Fuller, not once, not twice, but three times had to start over. When he was fired as the President for Habitat for Humanity he didn't give up. He and his wife co-founded a new foundation that is building houses. He's never lost the vision.

This is not a sermon for you to join others in judging Millard Fuller. It is a sermon for you to ask yourself, what about the shifting sands in your own life? Where are things shifting around right now? What do you need to do to return to the solid rock of Christ's loving? What mercy do you need to show to yourself because you wandered off into some other foundation, a foundation of success or a foundation built on something other than Christ's loving? What mercy do you need to show to others, who around you have chosen other foundations besides Christ? And what actions do you need to take to persevere in loving, in mercy in being Christ's person in the world, so that your words here of Lord, Lord will not be empty words. And your actions there in the world will not be empty actions but will be build on that solid foundation of Christ's love, Christ's mercy and Christ's call to be part of the action of building the kingdom. The first step is to ask for mercy. Come to Christ's table of mercy and ask. And the second is to ask now what action Lord, what action will be truly yours so that I might be building my life on your foundation. Let us ask for mercy together, let us ask together what actions to take and let us trust the Christ who loves us in times of shifting sands and in times of solid foundation.