

Wesley United Methodist Church

Rev. Beverly E Stenmark

October 8, 2017

Dwelling and Indwelling

Text: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-17

Psalm 19:1, 7-11, 14

Title: The Ground Floor: Laying the Foundation

Matthew 21:42 Jesus said to them, “Have you never read in the scriptures: ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’?”

The story is told of a man who owned a construction company. He noticed the excellent work that his supervisor did and the fine homes that he built. He called his supervisor into the office one day and told him, “I am putting you completely in charge of building our next house. You will make all the decisions. Make it the kind of house you would love. Do not spare any expense. Use the finest materials. Submit the bills and they will be paid without question. This is your opportunity.”

The supervisor started to think about this. The more he thought about it, the more he decided that this was a great opportunity for him to get something for himself. He designed an amazing looking home. However, he made deals with his suppliers to bill for the finest materials but to provide lower quality materials. They agreed to split the difference in the cost so that they both made some extra money. He figured that his boss would never know since he was completely in charge.

He pushed his team and cut corners wherever he could – including in the amount of time he allowed them to work; although he billed for a lot of overtime and pocketed the extra money.

When the house was finished, to the untrained eye it looked amazing. However, the foundation and the electrical system were not to code. The HVAC system would not be able to handle the needs of the house. The windows were drafty and the insulation was subpar. The supervisor handed the keys to his boss.

His boss asked him, "Is this the best house you could build?" "Yes, it is," he replied. "Did you use the best material and make everything high end?" "Yes, I did," replied the supervisor.

"Well, I'm glad," said his boss. "I hope this house is everything that you would ever want in a home, because it is yours. Here are the keys."ⁱ

The quality of what goes into building makes a difference. Over the next few weeks, we will be looking at scripture to see what provides a sure foundation for God's house which is not only a physical building but is also a spiritual house for those who seek to follow God.

Today we start from the ground up – we begin with the foundation. Today's scripture readings identify the foundation of the house for those who are God's people. The Bible contains many laws; tradition says there are 613 commandments in the Old Testament. The laws cover everything from the food eaten, to the type of clothes to be worn, how to deal with medical issues and civil issues and penalties for crimes. These were the laws which the Jewish people tried to follow and upon which they based their lives.

Today we heard what is called the decalogue or the Ten Commandments which are considered a good summary of all the other laws. These are the laws that tradition says were given to Moses when the Hebrew people escaped from slavery in Egypt, when they were trying to

learn how to live as a people called by God and not controlled by the Pharaoh.

So, it begins with the declaration that God brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and that they should have no other gods before this god who saved them. These laws form part of the foundation for who they – and we – are. They lie near the heart of the covenant relationship between God, Yahweh, and Israel. The Torah, or the law was the way the people say “yes” to God’s saving initiatives.ⁱⁱ For them, and for us, these laws remind us of what God has done for us. They provide a way to keep our lives centered, focused and balanced in God.

Later David, the psalmist praised the law of God. “The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul...” We heard the unity and order of God’s creation displayed. The law of God provides trustworthy order to our lives; an order that is righteous, sure, clear, pure, true. A life like this is to be desired even more than gold and tastes sweeter than honey. We are reminded that in difficult times, God is our rock and our redeemer; a perfect foundation.

Still later, Jesus said to those who were following him, “Have you never read in scripture – quoting from Psalm 118:22 – ‘The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this was the Lord’s doing, and it is amazing in our eyes’?” Jesus was referring to himself when he said this during the last week of his earthly life – between the time when he had been received with great excitement by the crowds on what we call Palm Sunday and the night when he was betrayed to the religious authorities by Judas.

Today the cornerstone has become more of a symbolic piece. The cornerstones of the churches that came together to form this congregation

are embedded in the floor of our narthex. In Jesus' day the cornerstone was the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation. It was very important since all the following stones would be set in reference to this stone, and it would determine the position of the entire structure.

Depending upon the translation we read, the word used may be "capstone" rather than "cornerstone". The "capstone" is the center stone in a stone arch holding all the other stones together. Whether cornerstone or capstone, the point is that Jesus is the most important stone in the building of the church. Jesus is the stone upon which all the others depend for the integrity of the church and our spiritual life.

As I was reading about cornerstones this week and the way that they have changed from being the true foundation stone of a building to be an honorary stone, I wondered whether that may have also happened in many of our churches. I found myself wondering if Jesus has become only a prominent decoration in some churches and among some Christians – something we proclaim and show off but may not be the true foundation upon which everything else depends. When that happens then our foundation loses its integrity, its stability and we more easily become a stumbling block for people rather than a witness of God's love.

In his letters in the New Testament, the apostle Peter reminds us that we are all given gifts and graces by the Holy Spirit. As we discover these and learn to use them we become living stones in the building. When we are aligned with Christ, the cornerstone, we are built up into a spiritual house where God lives.

God calls us to be stewards of God's house – the buildings, all of creation, all that God has created; all that God has given us. As we focus on the building God calls us to be, we are reminded that we are stewards.

Too often, stewardship is heard in churches to be all about money – all about raising money for the budget – but it is far far more than that.

Stewardship is not ownership. Stewardship is being entrusted with something, to care for it on behalf of another. All that we receive is a gift from God and we are entrusted with it, called to care for it for God. Stewardship is about finding the particular grace or gift that God has given each of us and using it for the good of the household.

Peter put it this way in his New Testament letter, I Peter 4:10-11: “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serve, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ.”

When we discover how our gifts fit in, then we are truly at home in the house or to use another image from scripture, we are truly a part of the body of Christ. In 1 Corinthians we hear about the body of Christ, and how some of us may be like hands, or feet, or ears, or eyes, or other parts of the body. Every part of the body is essential, and no part is superior to any other. They work together. This is true for us as people in the body of Christ or as living stones in the building of God’s house – physical or spiritual.

In John’s gospel, at Jesus’ last meal with his disciples, he washed their feet. Then he blessed and broke the bread and served a cup of wine. Afterwards he spoke to them of God’s house and its many rooms. He said that each of his disciples, each of us, would have a place in God’s house.

During these six weeks, we are looking at how we build God’s house. Today we have looked at the foundation – what helps our physical church

and our spiritual lives – to be built on a firm and sure foundation upon which the rest of our lives as followers of Christ are built.

I would invite each of us as individuals, and as part of this body of Christ, to be intentional about looking at our lives and what we do as a church and ask if all that we do is really built upon the cornerstone, the foundation of Christ. Rather than being an honorary stone, is Christ the stone upon which everything else is built – is the rest of our building lined up with Christ?

As we grow in Christian discipleship, we are gradually finding our place in the household. Sometimes, we will discover that our place may change as we grow and as God calls us to try different things, as we build upon where we have been and learn how God wants us to use our gifts. No matter where we are in God's house, there is a place for each of us because Jesus is the host, the cornerstone, the one who invites us into God's house.

“How lovely is your dwelling place, O God.”

ⁱ I have read this story, probably in an anthology of illustrations, but do not remember and could not locate the source.

ⁱⁱ Upper Room Disciplines, Oct 3, 2017