

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's lessons are all about destruction and construction, about collapsing and building, about failure and success. If you are like most of us, we've all experienced a bit of all these things in our lives.

Most of us are familiar with the story of the Flood and Noah and the ark. God looks at Creation and is very upset. Apparently, it isn't turning out as expected. God is appalled at the violence that is everywhere and at the corruption of the earth. God resolves to blot out the humans not out of anger or revenge but out of deep internal conflict: "It grieved him to his heart and he was sorry he had made them". There was one fly in the ointment, though, and it was Noah. It seems that there was one righteous man and God could not destroy him nor his family and what he needed to survive. And so we have the story of God warning Noah and commanding that he build an ark. If we read beyond our lesson, we'll see that when Noah left the ark, he built an altar to God and offered a burnt offering. In response to Noah's offering, God said in God's heart that he would never again curse the ground because of humankind and never again destroy every living thing. The story ends with God making a covenant with Noah and his descendants, the sign of which is a rainbow.

We are discovering that the flood story may well have some basis in fact. The first hint was that many other cultures and tribes in the area had a flood story in their

primeval myths. Later, geological evidence of a flood in the area of the Eastern Mediterranean was discovered. What is interesting is how the Jews came to tell the story. If you look at it closely, the only character in the story who is changed is God. God responds to Noah's worshipping sacrifice and resolves never again to destroy all life. **THAT** is the beginning of our religious life. Humankind has discovered that God is not only the Creative Force but that God is relational and involved with creation. In short, what we do, how we treat one another and the rest of creation affects God and that has consequences for the world we live in. That may sound very post-modern "new age-y", but it is very biblical.

Jesus picks up on this story in our Gospel lesson from Matthew's version of the Sermon on the Mount. Our Gospel lesson follows Jesus' warnings against taking the easy road in life and against false prophets. In effect, he says talk is cheap. "Not everyone who says 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven." He also tells his listeners that not even a fantastic ministry – making prophecies, casting out demons and doing deeds of great power in Jesus' name – will get Jesus to acknowledge them. He sets forth one standard for success in life – "doing the will of my Father in Heaven."

Jesus, the itinerate carpenter teacher, illustrates his teaching with an earthy story his listeners would understand – two men each build a house. The wise man built his house up higher on a rock. The foundation would be harder to build and he had to carry all the rocks up there. Not easy. The foolish man went for Plan B – easy to dig a foundation in sand and easy to get the rocks there. Jesus' listeners would know that in that part of the world the only place you find nice level sandy soil is in a wadi – a gulch or dried up river bed. The audience didn't really need to hear the rest of the

story. They knew that when exposed to exactly the same circumstances of a flash flood, the consequences would be dramatically different. They could easily see the connection between how we build our houses and how we build our relationship with God. Jesus didn't need to quote the Scriptures to them. No wonder they saw that he spoke not as a scribe but as one having authority of his own!

Before I went to seminary I was the general counsel of a reinsurance company. One of the biggest natural disasters during that time was Hurricane Andrew. I saw a picture of a neighborhood totally destroyed – except for one house. They asked the owner of that house how his had been spared. He told them that he had built the house himself and he had also read the Florida Building Code. It said to use 2"X12" roof trusses and that's what he did. It seems today that not only are we foolish in the way we build houses, but we see no connection between our relationships with one another and the earth and our relationship with God.

Church exists to make disciples. It exists to teach us and form us to see the world and to see the Father as Jesus did. It exists to create a community that discerns God's will in a confusing world and then to be a force for making the will of God happen! Our reading today closes the Sermon on the Mount. It is not to the Church's credit that the lectionary gives Chapters 5, 6 and 7 of Matthew short shrift because that's where Jesus talks a lot about the will of the Father. I would urge you to read them this week at home – it's only 5 pages in my study Bible. Read those chapters because it is what we individually and collectively should be about! It's summation of the Law as Jesus would have it is verse 7:14 – “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” You want to be treated justly? Then treat others justly. You want to be treated with love, respect and

caring? Then treat everyone around you with equal love, respect and caring. You want to be adequately compensated and have a decent standard of life? Then make sure others have the same opportunity.

That is authentic faith. Jesus tells us that we can build the biggest mega-churches and fill them to overflowing with great preaching and music and all sorts of programs, but if we do not turn out disciples then we have built our churches on sand. If we build churches that prefer political power over justice, that prefer to support a status quo that is unjust rather than to challenge it and risk displeasure, that prefer wealth to truth, then we build on sand.

What is the will of the Father? That is exactly the question the author of Matthew wants us to ask as we read the book. All life is choice, Jesus is saying in today's reading. Do we choose to live by the Way of Jesus or for the self? Do we choose to center our lives in caring trusting relationships with one another and God? Or do we choose center our lives on accumulating power, wealth or other stuff to fill the "God space" in our lives? You choose, Jesus says because sooner or later that choice will be put to the test. It is unfortunate that many people look at this as a threat or with fear, focusing only on judgment. To do this we fail to see the connection between consequences and opportunity! God does not want us to fail; through Christ God brings us into God's life that we may be the Body of Christ in the world and succeed in bringing the world to where God would have it be.

Amen.