

“Don’t Take Your Foundation for Granite,” November 15, 2009

Message part 1

You may be aware that several of us have just returned from 11 days in Israel and Jordan, and as we traveled there, I was reminded again of just how powerful the land of the Bible really is. One day, as we were driving through the desert region south of Jerusalem, we crossed what is called a “wadi.” That’s actually a dry creek bed, and this one looked quite harmless, but the guide told us that when the rains come, that quiet stream turns into a raging torrent of flood waters, wiping out anything in its path.

Knowing that little piece of information can help bring today’s Bible passage to life for us. Jesus is trying to encourage his followers to find the foundation of their lives, and he uses an example with which they are quite familiar—the example of building a house either on a solid rock foundation, or building one on the sand of a dry wadi bed. This is how our passage reads:

“These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, home-owner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words—words to build a life on. If you work these words into your life, you are like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock. Rain poured down, the river flooded, a tornado hit—but nothing moved that house. It was fixed to the rock.

“But if you use my words in Bible studies and don’t work them into your life, you are like a stupid carpenter who built his house on the sandy beach. When a storm rolled in and the waves came up, it collapsed like a house of cards.”

Message part 2

What Jesus is encouraging his listeners and us to be alert to is not putting our entire weight on that which is temporary and not lasting, like a building on a weak foundation, like this one in Shanghai...[\(Pic on screen.\)](#) Rather, we need to have a firm foundation, built on solid rock—one that we know and count on to sustain us and give us what we need to make it through the storms of life that most assuredly will come.

The rough times of life are different for all of us. Some of us have to face serious illness and disease, and endure the long regimen of treatment, filled with anxiety and stress. Others of us seem directionless, not knowing which way to turn or how to get out of the mess which is our life. Yet others wage a daily battle with addiction, struggling to be clean and sober from one moment to the next.

Still others fight the depths of depression, and seem to be living under a constant, dark cloud. Others of us may not be able to name a specific situation or condition, but we, too, feel aimless about life, not sure about the meaning or purpose of our existence. All-in-all, at some point in life, most of us face an existential crisis—wondering what it’s all about.

You may recall an incident that happened not long ago right here in Indianapolis. Someone wielding a gun tried to rob a check-cashing store, and the man resorted to such desperate measures because he had been out of work for a year, and had a two-year-old son to support. He simply didn’t know what else to do, and as the Good Morning America segment on this experience stated, people do things they might never otherwise do, because they are going through such tough times.

When we hit bottom like isn’t there a better way? Where is that rock solid foundation that will keep us from being blown away by the storms?

The rest of that story gives us a strong hint. As you probably remember, the clerk began talking to the robber about God, and they even prayed together. He finally removed the bullet from his gun, assuring her that he would not hurt her. In an interview with him after his arrest, he talked about his change of heart, and how powerful it was that the woman prayed with him and for him, and even hugged him. He is certainly going to face the charges for what he did, but hopefully, something positive is coming out of that situation, as we begins to connect with a stronger foundation, one that can help him through the storms of life.

I believe that foundation we all need is God—God’s love, God’s goodness, and God’s constant presence, and I’m not the only one who believes that. Barbara Bradley Hagerty is the NPR religion journalist that I’ve spoken about before, and she has recently written her first book entitled, *Fingerprints of God: The Search for the Science of Spirituality*. Her basic search is to find a God gene that’s part of all of us—some yearning we all have to connect with a

higher power, the source of life and love. In the process of searching for that God gene, she encounters a number of persons who have had what she refers to as a “spiritual experience,” and counts herself among them.

One of the questions Hagerty asks is about the forces of life that, in her words, “push a person off the cliff of agnosticism and into the sea of faith.” She says, “Emotional and physical trauma rank high on the list, as does a brush with death. Next to those are the quieter psychological triggers: a poor relationship with one’s parents, or stress, or even low self-esteem.”

She’s talking about brokenness—brokenness that occurs when life defeats us. She continues, “It happens when you come to the end of yourself; you have exhausted your own resources, your own strength and resilience to cope with the situation at hand. You surrender, and in that release, you find a strange calm.” She’s saying that there are many who hit rock bottom, and who, in the end, have some sort of experience or encounter with a higher power.

Barbara Bradley Hagerty cites a book that I’ve also read, *Aging Well*. In that book, author and Harvard psychiatrist George Valliant reports on two groups of men who were followed from the time they were eighteen—men who were Harvard graduates, as well as men from the inner-city of Boston. After chronicling their life journeys for over 60 years, Valliant came to some interesting insights about spirituality. He wrote, “Looking at those who are spiritual, it has nothing to do with mental health, and nothing to do with good fortune. It has everything to do with recovery from brokenness.”

How do we recover from the kind of brokenness both authors talk about? How do we start climbing out of the darkness when we’ve hit rock bottom?

I do believe it starts with having faith, some sort of belief in a higher power and the ultimate source of love, some inbred trust in a God who is good and who can and will guide us, if we allow it. Whether or not we have a mountain-top type of experience, we have some kind of inner knowing that what we experience here and now is not all there is, and that we can somehow endure because of a strength, a power, a goodness greater than our own.

Sometimes that presence shows itself in almost supernatural ways. I’ve shared with you in the past that the vision for The Garden actually came to me in a dream, and it was a

dream that occurred during one of the most down, most desperate, more turmoil-filled times in my life when I didn’t know if I which way to go. In the darkness of that time, I’m convinced that it was God who spoke to me in a dream, and gave me the courage to go in a new direction. I’m convinced that this wasn’t of my own thinking or dreaming, but was definitely a “God thing.” You may have had something like that occur in your life, too, something that has brought a sense of peace and hope into the core of your being; I believe that’s an encounter with the holy.

I believe that we are made for relationship with God, and it’s important that we make space in our lives for God to break in and lead us in new ways. However, God has a way of getting through to us, even when we least expect it or are prepared for it. Someone on worship team referred to this as the “2x4 of life smacking us upside the head.” It’s getting to the point of realizing that life isn’t what it could be, and then recognizing that something has to change. It’s a kind of personal life crisis, a moment that leads us to redefining our lives, who we are, and what we’re about. It’s then we can take the steps needed to make the change, with the support of others.

One of those ways is through the supportive organizations that are here in the community to help us in tough times. These organizations can provide a firm foundation for our lives, and probably the best example of that is AA, Alcoholics Anonymous. This group, and other support groups like it, can have a profound effect on those who feel broken, giving a sense of understanding and mutual bonding that doesn’t happen elsewhere. It’s spending time with those who have walked similar journeys and who can relate and understand in ways that no one else can.

The same kind of things happens when those who are grieving gather to support one another. I know you recently heard again about a gathering of the dads who have endured the death of a child, and who have just written a book to help other dads find the support they need. Any kind of grief group can serve that role.

Those who are facing cancer often find understanding and strength from others who are dealing with the disease. Certainly, support groups aren’t for everyone, but they are here and available for us when we need them. The reality is that all of us, in one way or another, can be the wounded healer that Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen talked about. We’re all broken in some way, and out of our own

brokenness, we can provide understanding and support for others who are engaged in a similar struggle.

There are certainly other forms of foundational support that aren't found in a formal structure or organization. We have friends and family who sometimes come to our aid in surprising fashion. Maybe even an acquaintance or co-worker can be the one who will open the door at the right time, and allow us to pass through to a new understanding, a new way of being. Those persons are all part of our steadfast rock foundation.

Another Worship Team member shared with me something that we all need to remember, because we're all part of the foundation of support for one another. It's 15 Facts of Life, and the first two are very powerful reminders of those in our lives who are here for us when we need them, being the hand of God in our time of need. The first fact of life says this: "At least 5 people in this world love you so much they would die for you." And number two says, "At least 15 people in this world love you in some way."

That forms our foundation—the base that keeps us strong in the face of life's storms. God, or whatever you want to call the source of goodness and love, that we experience somehow in a knowable way, and Godliness found in the hands and hearts and voices of friends, family, support groups. Those make up the foundation that will not fail us.

Closing:

Madeleine L'Engle wrote, "Faith is what makes life bearable, with all its tragedies and ambiguities and sudden, startling joys." I agree with her; faith, spirituality, connection with something greater than we,—that's what makes life bearable and worthwhile.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.