

1 Sermon, September 16, 2012

Texts: 2 Timothy 2:8-21, Matthew 7:21-29

Title: "A Firm Foundation"

1. A firm foundation
2. What, according to the Bible is our firm foundation?
3. Is it belief? Assent to the truth of something?
4. Is it Christ in us?
5. Is it community?

1. A firm foundation

We've sung it already twice. Jesus is a firm foundation. We'll sing it again: Christ is a solid rock. In many songs and hymns, Christ is referred to as "a rock in a weary land," or "the Church's one foundation."

Why is this image of Jesus as a firm foundation so popular in Christian song?

I know of two reasons:

First, it's Biblical. From Genesis, where we read about "the Shepherd, the rock of Israel" to the Psalms, where we read, "You are my rock, my fortress," to 1 Corinthians, where it says, "they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ."

The second reason is that Christ being a solid rock is based in personal experience. When all else failed, people have turned to Christ, and found him solid and reliable.

There are many things that can shake us to the foundation. Loss, deep disappointment, challenges by those whom we respect, but who do not have faith.

Most of us have not experienced war or famine, but these do shake a person to the foundation.

The question is, will your faith hold? Is your faith built on rock?

On October 2, 2006, in an Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, Charles Carl Roberts did what was unthinkable. He shot ten girls, the oldest of whom was 13. Only three survived. I won't dwell on the details.

Despite this terrible, devastating news, the Amish community did not respond with anger.

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Instead, the Amish responded according to the foundation that was their faith and their community.

The Amish community kept repeating the phrase that the girls were "safe in the arms of Jesus."

The Amish took advantage of crisis counseling offered by secular authorities, and began to adjust themselves to a "new normal."

Most surprising to the outside world was the way that the Amish forgave the man who had shot the girls. The Amish quickly realized that the killer's wife and children were also victims.

In the hours after the shooting, one of the local Amish ministers visited Charles Roberts widow and her parents. The minister and several others visited for about ten minutes, just to express their sorrow and let them know that the Amish did not hold anything against the Roberts family.

Many other Amish brought gifts and food to Amy Roberts and her family. They realized that the family's breadwinner was now gone.

When people from around the world began sending money to the Amish in Nickel Mines, the committee that had been formed shared the money with Amy Roberts and her family.

At Charles Roberts' funeral, over half in attendance were Amish, there to support the family of the shooter.

Part of the reason is the way that the Amish reinforced the Christian message day in and day out. One of the signs in many Amish schoolhouses is JOY, which stands for Jesus first, others next, yourself last.

The Amish seldom talk much to outsiders about their faith, but in the press of all the media questions about Amish forgiveness, some of the members of the community tried to explain it.

One said, "It is only through our faith in Jesus Christ that forgiveness is possible. He is the one who deserves the praise and glory, not us Amish."

Jesus was their firm foundation.

2. What, according to the Bible is our firm foundation?

Second Timothy tells us that God's firm foundation stands, and on that foundation is inscribed:

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"The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness."

I take that to mean that the firm foundation has something to do with the relationship between the Lord who claims his own, and the people who love the Lord and turn away from evil.

The foundation is in that love/that trust/that devotion.

Jesus himself said, "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock."

So, in that case, the foundation (the rock) is a life built on the trying to act out the words and principles of Jesus.

Another scripture passage that speaks of our foundation can be found in Ephesians 2:19-22:

"So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God." Ephesians 2:19-22, NRSV.

In this passage, the emphasis isn't so much on doing the right thing, but on the relationship to God's people. It tells us that we need a community of faith, a tradition of faith, a connection to what God is doing and has done through other people, in order to have a firm foundation.

3. Is it belief? Assent to the truth of something?

So what is our firm foundation?

Is it simply saying that Jesus is Lord, and trusting in him?

One Christian who had to have a firm foundation was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who resisted the Nazis in Germany. Bonhoeffer was put in prison and eventually put to death.

Bonhoeffer's foundation was not only Jesus, but the Church. He wrote:

"The Church is the Church only when it exists for others...not dominating, but helping and serving. It must tell ... what it means to live for Christ, to exist for others." – *Letters & Papers from Prison*

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Bonhoeffer had very dark days in prison. He wrote:

*Stretched out upon my prison bed, I stare at the empty wall.
Outside, a summer evening, regardless of me,
goes singing into the country.
Softly ebbs the tide of the day on the eternal shore...
In the stillness of the night, I listen.
Only footsteps and shouts of the guards,
A loving couple in the distance, stifled laughter.
Can you hear nothing else, you sluggish sleeper?
I hear my own soul totter and tremble...
Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Prison Poems*

But in the midst of that despair, Bonhoeffer had a firm faith. He wrote another prison poem:

*And shouldst thou offer us the bitter cup, resembling
sorrow, filled to the brim and overflowing,
we will receive it thankfully, without trembling,
from thy hand, so good and ever-loving.
Dietrich Bonhoeffer – Prison Poems*

This is the very human Dietrich Bonhoeffer, commending his spirit into the hands of God.

For Bonhoeffer, the foundation included the church, the Christian community, but went beyond that to a personal trust in God.

Just this past week, I was talking to a friend about a friend of his that had experienced a deep, personal tragedy. My friend described his friend's situation: "They believe – but don't have a rock to stand on."

Yes, this friend believed in God, but there was something missing. They weren't connected to the church. They did not have a living, local relationship with other Christians who could support them.

Where is your firm foundation?

I believe that the firmest foundation has two legs to stand on. The one leg is a relationship of trust in Christ, where part of your relationship is a desire to do God's will. The other leg is a relationship to Christian community, the body of Christ, where you have a desire to serve others.

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If one leg is missing, you may still stand, but it's easier to get blown over.

Father Damien, who lived with lepers in Hawaii in the 1800s, ultimately succumbed to the disease. Leprosy does not kill quickly. It kills over a long time. You know it for a long time that you have it.

Father Damien said,

"Having no doubts about the true nature of the disease, I am calm, resigned, and very happy in the midst of my people. God certainly knows what is best for my sanctification and I gladly repeat: 'Thy will be done.'"

Father Damien had a firm foundation. It was not only trust in Christ and a desire to serve him, but also a love for the people he lived with and served.

One last story. Two years ago, earthquakes devastated the island nation of Haiti. In Port-au-Prince, the Cathedral suffered heavy damage. Juliette Tassy who has gone to Mass at that cathedral all her life, said:

"It's really a catastrophe when I'm seeing the cathedral in this state," she says. "But if you look at the cross, it didn't fall, it stands up. Almost all the Catholic churches that collapsed, the cross in front is still standing. It means something. It means that we need to keep our faith."

Our firm foundation is something that keeps us standing in the midst of all that happens around us.

I pray that your faith is squarely founded on that foundation.
Amen.

"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, a descendant of David—that is my gospel, for which I suffer hardship, even to the point of being chained like a criminal. But the word of God is not chained. Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, so that they may also obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. The saying is sure: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself. Remind them of this, and warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved by him, a

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worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly explaining the word of truth. Avoid profane chatter, for it will lead people into more and more impiety, and their talk will spread like gangrene. Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place. They are upsetting the faith of some. But God's firm foundation stands, bearing this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Let everyone who calls on the name of the Lord turn away from wickedness." In a large house there are utensils not only of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for special use, some for ordinary. All who cleanse themselves of the things I have mentioned will become special utensils, dedicated and useful to the owner of the house, ready for every good work." 2 Timothy 2:8-21, NRSV.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?' Then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.'" "Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!" Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes." Matthew 7:21-29, NRSV.