

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 6:46-49, “How (and what) Do We Build?”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 2/23/2025

For the last month or so, I’ve been working on plans
for a backyard studio / writing / study / prayer space.
It’s really a glorified shed, but the question I’ve had to ask
myself (and Sonja) is: just how glorified is it going to be?

Every aspect of the building process opens up a huge array of options,
ranging from basic, functional, and cheap all the way up to premium,
long-lasting, and expensive.

So I’ve found myself asking questions I never thought I would ask:
Should I install strapping between my sheathing and rain cladding?
What is the ventilation plan for the rafters in this roof assembly?
Do I need to use ground-contact pressure-treated lumber
for a sill plate?
Wait a minute – what is a sill plate?
How do I calculate the R-value of a window based on its U-value?
(If you’re wondering, $1 / \text{the U-value}$ provides the R-value)
For this climate zone should I install a semi-permeable air barrier
on the inside of the studs, or the outside?
Along the way I’m poring over articles with titles like,
“Insulating Over a Structural Slab:
Skip the sleepers and float the subfloor
over rigid XPS insulation”

These things are just as mind-numbing and opaque as they sound.
(But it’s better for me than reading the news!)

Jesus’ sermon closes his Sermon on the Plain
with an illustration about two builders
that I think very much validates my concerns in these areas.
How do we build our lives?

What first comes to mind for me are the big decisions:
Where we live and work, what we study, who we do or don’t marry,
great moments of crisis and tragedy, or triumph and celebration.

But it's not quite right to let the big moments define how we build our lives.
Because in fact the big moments are formed through many small,
ordinary moments and decisions
where our values and character are tested and formed.
We build our lives more through reflecting on
how we respond to someone who annoys us
after a long day than we do by casting a grand vision
of doing great things.

Along these lines, Frederick Buechner wrote,
"Whatever you do with your life—whatever you end up achieving
or not achieving—the great gift you have in you to give
to the world is the gift of who you alone are;
your way of seeing things, and saying things, and feeling about things,
that is like nobody else's.
If so much as a single one of you were missing,
there would be an empty place at the great feast of life
that nobody else in all creation could fill."

What matter most about us are the unique,
often unnoticed small things of our lives.
If we fail to offer them up to the Spirit each day,
then how can we concern ourselves with
the *what we think* are the great things in life?

In the end, Jesus is talking to us about trust.
Do we trust him?
Our response to the teaching found in the Sermon on the Plain
depends on what we make of the Preacher on the Plain.

Imagine you're at a stoplight, and a man runs up
to your passenger side window, bangs on it, and says,
"Get out of the car, now!" ... What do you do?

Well, it really depends on who you think this man is.
Imagine you think he's trying to steal your car – do you obey his words?
What if you believe he's a police officer who noticed
you parked over the train tracks,
and he's trying to save your life?
Do you obey his words?

What are we to make of Jesus, who is always upsetting our expectations?
Who do you say he is?
Is he a well-meaning but slightly naïve sage from ancient times
who is out of touch with today's world?
Or is he a Master Builder who was
instrumental for the creation of all things?

Does Jesus offer helpful opinions about how to be kind and loving?
Or does Jesus hold the blueprints
for how God's reconstruction project unfolds in our lives?

Whether we trust Jesus enough to build our lives on him
makes all the difference – from all the small moments
up to the grand moments.

Now, having said that, I think you should notice that both houses
are beat upon by flood waters.

There is nothing in the Bible that promises we get out of hardships
by trusting in Jesus or doing what he says.
Whatever you choose, the rain will come, the water will rise,
the wind will beat against the house of your life.

The difference is seen in how we withstand these events.
I'm going to build the backyard studio over the next few months,
with some help, of course, and I assume that when it's done
it will appear to be a pretty nice little space.
But one week in October or November,
the wind and the rain will come down day after day
and that will be the test of whether all the little decisions
and all the repeated actions
were made wisely and skillfully,
or if I end up with a leaky roof.

The test, for Jesus, is trusting his words
and *putting them into practice*.

If we trust that the poor are blessed,
that those who weep will be comforted,
that those who hunger and thirst will be satisfied,

and that those who are persecuted
stand on common ground with the prophets,
then our lives—the little things in our lives—will be distinct.

We will develop hearts able to love our enemies.
We will be much slower to judgment.
We will look first to our own faults before pointing out others'.
We will be able to know a tree by its fruit,
discerning where the good fruit of God
is coming into season, and ready for harvest.
In other words, we will *do* the things that Jesus says to do.

Who of us can stand before such a statement?
Who of us can say that we have completely done
what the physician of our bodies and our souls
has asked us to do?

“Whoever puts them into practice?” Jesus, I’m ruined!
I don’t really trust you all the time.
I am utterly incapable
of practicing the words that you have spoken.
My efforts are one failure after another.

It seems there’s no hope! Unless...unless Jesus is who he claims to be.

Could this Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and walked and taught in Israel
2000 years ago, be at the same time the author of all life?

Could this Jesus of Nazareth,
who was born to a frightened but faithful teenage girl,
be at the same time the one who knit you together
in your mother’s womb?

Could this Jesus of Nazareth,
who laughed loudly with drunks and spoke easily
with an adulterous Samaritan woman,
be at the same time the Living Word,
the one who was with God and was God?
Who is in all and through all,
who holds all things together?

Could this Jesus of Nazareth,
 who welcomed the little children who ran to him,
 be at the same time the one who even now
 sits on the throne in heaven and intercedes
 for his siblings on earth
 when they do not know how to pray?

If that's who Jesus is, then we can know that he did not speak these words
 to destroy us or drive us to despair.

You see, I believe that Jesus speaks to the people of God
 a self-fulfilling prophecy that awakens
 the life of the Kingdom in those who hear it.

When we say, "Jesus, I am ruined,
 there's no way I can do everything you say to do,"
 Jesus says, "Congratulations!
 Blessed are you – blessed are *the poor*."

This is the perspective of Darrell Johnson who says
 that we are intentionally compelled by the end of this sermon
 to go back to its beginning,
 back to Jesus' announcements of blessing
 in the Beatitudes.

If you long to put Jesus' words into practice but don't know how
 or don't feel capable, then take that right back to Jesus.

Tell Jesus, "I want to build my house on the rock,
 but my world is covered in sand because I'm shortsighted
 and don't stick with it, and don't have my stuff together.
 I can't find any rocky places to get started building!"

Will you help me to trust you more,
 please show me where your rock is in my life,
 and change me from being a foolish builder into a wise one.
 I can't do this on my own, but because of who you are,
 I believe that *you* can do it in and through me."

If you want to tell Jesus something like that, then I want you to reflect on
 a few questions with me. [*go slowly*]

Do you recognition (even just a little bit)
your own poverty?
Yours is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Do you have a growing sense of mourning
over the unjust ways of the world that surround us?
You shall be comforted.

Do you sense even a slightly larger appetite for righteousness,
for right relationships with others in your life?
Your hunger and thirst shall be satisfied.

Is it possible that, even in a small way,
you have been thought less of or snubbed or ridiculed
on account of your association with Jesus?
Yours is the Kingdom of heaven.

These things, these beatitude characteristics,
are the fruit of the Kingdom's arrival in us.
This is proof that the rock is there for us to build on.

If you have noticed one or more of these,
then I encourage you to keep looking for the others:
they are on the way.

Jesus is changing us so that we can be the wise builders
God has made us to be.

For the church in the United States, we are in an incredibly important time
to trust Jesus' words and, with the Spirit's empowerment,
do what he says.

Canadian songwriter Alana Levandosky describes our situation as
“a trauma bond that cannot coexist with love,
and it grows and thrives on name calling, on better-than energy,
on hypocrisy, and on hopelessness.”

I'll read that again ... do you recognize that energy?
Is the fruit of that energy the fruit of God's kingdom
or the fruit of the world?

So the answer, the only answer, is to infuse our hearts, minds, bodies,
and relationships with love – *specifically* the kind of enemy love
that Jesus talks about in this sermon.

The way of love is *powerful*. Much more powerful and enduring
than these other things, because it emerges from God's own being.

Even as the storm is raging and the waters are rising, Jesus is changing us.
Jesus is clearing away the sand and showing us where the rock is.

We put these words into practice, when we come honestly before each other,
when we shake off the pretense of having it all together,
when we open up our lives and hopes and dreams
to Jesus and say,

“Okay, I don't know how this will work, but I trust you,
and I'm joining with all these other would-be wise builders.
Come hell or high water, we're walking in your direction.”