

“Back to Basics”

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The passage Nancy read for us follows the one we heard last week in which Jesus is talking to a great crowd of people who have come to hear him and to be healed. Among other things, he tells them to love their enemies, to bless and pray for them. In today's scriptures, he goes on to talk about how we should avoid judging others and that we need to clean up our own act before we get into other people's business. And he uses the image of trees to illustrate how our character is manifested in our words and our behavior. But I want to focus on the last illustration in this passage today, which is about whether we choose to build our houses on rock or on bare ground.

Listen again to these words from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible in Luke 6:46–49: “Why do you call me ‘Lord, Lord,’ but do not do what I tell you? I will show you what someone is like who comes to me, hears my words, and acts on them. That one is like a man building a house, who dug deeply and laid the foundation on rock; when a flood arose, the river burst against that house but could not shake it, because it had been well built. But the one who hears and does not act is like a man who built a house on the ground, without a foundation. When the river burst against it, immediately it fell, and great was the ruin of that house.”

Anyone who's spent much time with me knows I often overthink things or make them more difficult than they need to be—stop smiling, friends—but you'll be glad to know that I found this scripture passage pretty straightforward. This morning's message is a simple one, growing out of the directness and simplicity of Jesus's question: Why do you call on me and then not act on what I tell you?

I suspect many of our doctors, dentists, and therapists would ask us the same thing when it comes to our physical and mental health. And heaven knows we seek advice and how-to information from inspirational speakers, self-help books, websites, and experts of all kinds about everything from organizing our homes to managing our time to meditating to finishing that novel to getting a better night's sleep. Yet we don't always put what we've learned into action.

What does Jesus call us to do? It's not complicated; in fact, it's pretty basic: Love God. Love your neighbor. Love your enemies. Forgive. Seek peace. Work for justice. Take care of each other. Take everything you don't need and give it to the poor. Take care of creation. Be still and listen. Pray. Be still and listen some more. Appreciate your gifts and use them as an expression of God's love. The wording and details of how we do all that may be different for everyone, but the basics are the same.

Yet we struggle to follow through. Just because the instructions are clear doesn't mean it's easy to carry them out. Why do we so often fall short?

Our list of reasons could be very long, but here are just a few that came to mind as I pondered this question. The first is that sometimes, living out God's call is just plain inconvenient. In a culture where convenience for those with money is often literally on our doorstep in the form of a box from Amazon, taking our recyclables to the transfer station is inconvenient. It's one way to respond to God's call to be good stewards of the earth, yet it can feel like a chore.

In a similar vein, giving someone a ride to the doctor might feel inconvenient. Jesus teaches us to help our neighbor, but doing so might mean we have to step out of our routine that day—and we get pretty invested in our routines.

Close on the heels of inconvenience is that sometimes we simply don't want to take the *time* to listen to and follow God's leading. We resist because we're busy. Too busy to really stop and listen to that friend, that family member, that person in line with us at the store who may not see or talk with anyone else all day. Too busy to show up. Too busy to call and check in with someone we know is struggling. *C'mon, God, choose someone who's retired, doesn't have kids at home, isn't already doing a million things.* The issue of time is one I wrestle with constantly. *No, God, as a matter of fact, I DON'T have 20 minutes to meditate and pray this morning. Can't you see I'm running my own business here and have two deadlines today??*

Another place of resistance is in our thinking that doing what God wants is too hard. Perhaps the most difficult teaching for me is to love my enemies. Not long ago I participated in an event where the organizer just happened to pair me up with someone who's been on my "list" for a number of years now. We had to spend about half an hour together, and it was the first time we'd spoken in at least five years. Now, if that wasn't God's doing, I don't know what is. It was definitely uncomfortable, and I confess I got out of that situation as soon as I could gracefully do so. But I was with that person long enough to be reminded that they are more than someone I've resented for a long time. I'd sort of fixed them in my mind over the years so that I no longer thought of them as someone with their own challenges, their own tender heart.

Of course I've known all along that I need to forgive that person, but I wasn't actively working on it. It was too hard. God was asking too much of me. I guess I was waiting until I became a better person, like that was magically going to happen without any effort on my part. I think God put me together with that other person in that situation to remind me that I have work to do. It was an opportunity to take a first step toward healing. Holding on to my resentment isn't consistent with what I say I want to be as a follower of Jesus.

Finally, I think that much of our resistance to Jesus's teaching is rooted in fear. Maybe we're afraid that giving more of our resources—whether that means love, money, time, or something else—means there won't be enough left for us. It will never come back to us, in any form. The Reverend Lynice Pinkard, a UCC pastor in California, says, "To love wastefully and give recklessly—that scares us." Maybe we're afraid we won't "do it right": We won't say the right words when we call someone or write a note or are asked to offer a prayer.

Forgiving someone, loving our enemies, is risky. We might look weak if we forgive someone who's hurt us, or they might take advantage of that forgiveness and hurt us again.

Maybe we're even afraid of recognizing and using our gifts. We're afraid of failing or making fools of ourselves. Perhaps we're afraid others won't appreciate our gifts or respond to them the way we hope. Maybe we're afraid of looking egotistical. Maybe we're afraid of letting our own light shine.

No doubt there are plenty of other reasons we don't do those basic things Jesus asks us to do, but those are some of the biggies that come immediately to mind: inconvenience, thinking I'm too busy and don't have enough time, it's too hard and means being uncomfortable, and fear.

So how does all this affect the house we build with our lives, to use the imagery from Luke's gospel. This is where we apply our commitment as Christians, where our character and faith become visible. I know that if I'm not deliberate and intentional about it, I won't have much of a foundation for my house. I find inspiration in the words of Lynice Pinkard, who says, "Our goal is progress, not perfection. If we can't love our enemies, we can start by loving the people who love us back and then move on from there to people we find a little suspect, and then to the people we don't like at all."

I would add that we can start by praying for those people who love us and then move on to people we find a little suspect and then to the people we don't like at all. I admit I'm not very consistent about praying for people I don't like, or people I think have wronged me. They're not usually on my prayer list; they're on my "other" list. And when I do pray for them, I often can't muster more than a moment of imagining them surrounded by and filled with a peaceful light. Still, I have to believe that those moments help me build my house on a solid foundation, help me heal, and contribute to the world's well-being. It's a way I can put my faith into practice.

In the last few years that I lived in Seattle, I ran three mornings a week with my friend Anne. We used to run around Greenlake, which was a little less than 3 miles. I was never a morning person, but knowing Anne would be waiting for me at the lake at 6 a.m. helped get me out of bed. I had never been an athlete, never participated in any sports, so this was brand new for me, but I liked thinking of myself as a runner.

Unlike me, Anne had been running for years, and one spring she proposed that we run in the Beat the Bridge race, an annual 5-mile fundraiser for diabetes research. The goal is to cross University Bridge, near the University of Washington campus, before it rises and opens. If you don't get across the bridge in time, you have to wait a few minutes until it's lowered again. I'd never run 5 miles at once, but if I wanted to beat the bridge on race day, I had to spend the next several weeks getting up earlier, warming up, and running even when I didn't want to. If I was going to call myself a runner, especially one who participated in fundraisers, I needed to be true to that. Anne and I did beat the bridge on race day, by the way.

Making that commitment and then getting out there on those chilly mornings helped me learn to trust myself. I actually could follow through, be consistent, and build that practice, that trust, bit by bit. In a similar way, I can build my faith bit by bit, each piece contributing to a strong foundation.

Friends, floods will arise against our houses regardless of how we've built them. Maybe the floods take the form of a job loss, the death of loved ones, the ending of relationships, illness, moving, turmoil in our country, a pandemic—all of us will experience those things. Even sudden good fortune, like an inheritance or winning the lottery, can be a major source of stress. People cope with those kinds of stress in all kinds of ways both destructive and constructive.

I lost my father to cancer in 1994. When he first told me he had lymphoma, nine months earlier, he added, "This doesn't change anything in terms of how Mom and I live or how we'll deal with this. We've always been consistent." In other words, their houses would withstand the flood that had just hit them. No epiphanies or wake-up calls or big changes in lifestyle for them. There is nothing wrong with epiphanies and wake-up calls—thank God for them, in fact—but I still think of his words and what they said about his faith and how he lived his life.

We can wait to live out Jesus's words until it's more convenient, or we have more time, or we're no longer afraid, or we're better people—whenever that's going to be. But the fact is, we have opportunities to build our faith by doing what Jesus asks of us every single day. Thanks be to God.