

I

In the late summer of 2008, Hurricane Ike slammed into the Upper Texas coast, and the Bolivar Peninsula, just to the east of Galveston Bay, bore the brunt of Ike's ferocious storm surge.

The day after the storm, news helicopters broadcast truly startling images from above the beachside village of Gilchrist. From the air, the roads and driveways of Gilchrist were easily visible. But what was so startling was that after the storm, those roads and driveways led nowhere. Every single structure had simply been washed away, swept cleanly from the face of the earth by the fury of the wind and the waves. Every single home, that is, except for one.

And that's the image that still, to this very day, sticks in my mind. One solitary house standing tall, when everything else around it was simply washed away.

You don't have to be an architect or structural engineer to see that something was different about this house. This house was subjected to the same howling winds, the same driving rain, the same roiling storm surge, as every other house for miles and miles.

Why did this one house stand when every other one fell? Clearly, there was something fundamentally different about the way in which it was constructed, but that difference wasn't noticeable until after the storm had passed.

II

We're taking a short break from our read through Acts this morning, and we're turning our attention to the Gospel According to Matthew. Just after Jesus has called his first disciples, he calls them and the crowds together, walks a few steps up a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and begins to teach. If you have one of those red-letter bibles, the kind where the words of Jesus are set in red type, you may notice that the fifth, sixth, and seventh chapters of Matthew's gospel are almost entirely filled with red ink. That's because this first extended teaching that Jesus does has become known to us as "The Sermon on the Mount."

In Matthew's Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount functions something like an inaugural address. It's a thesis statement that outlines what Jesus' administration will be about, what values and norms and moral codes will guide the way, a vision for a preferred future. Some of Jesus' most famous and most difficult teachings are laid out in the Sermon on the Mount.

Here's just a smattering:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit.
Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are you.*

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill.

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Do not judge, so that you may not be judged. For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get.

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.

And on and on it goes, The Sermon on the Mount, Jesus' Inaugural Address.

And that then leads us to our text for this morning, the closing of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. So I invite you to listen now for a Word from God from Matthew 7:24-29.

"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 build his house on sand. The rain

fell, 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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

III

When I was young, I had a dream of being a professional storm chaser. Our home wasn't far from the University of Oklahoma and the National Severe Storms Laboratory, so my mom and dad suggested that we make a visit to the campus.

My classroom strengths have always leaned toward the language arts and social studies end of things, so when I met with a professor in the meteorology department and learned that I'd be required to take lots of physics and chemistry and calculus and statistics, I was less enthusiastic about pursuing a career as a storm chaser.

However, I do know this. Everywhere on the face of the earth, there is a 100% chance of a storm at some point in the future. It may be in a few hours, it may be in a few days, it may be in a few decades or even centuries, but eventually, there's not a square inch of the globe that won't be impacted by a storm of some kind at some point in time.

And my guess, my friend, is that right now, you're living through a storm of some kind. My guess is that there is something going on in your life that is testing your foundations, testing the stuff that is deep down in your guts. Maybe for you, the storm is relatively tame – just a little wind, a little thunder, a few drops. Or maybe for you, it's a little sportier. Maybe you're living right in this very moment through the worst storm you've ever been through in your entire life.

Storms, by their very nature, test the foundations of things. And Jesus was clear. Those who hear his words and act on them will be like a wise one who build their house on the rock. The rains came, and the wind blew and beat against the house, but it did not fall, because its foundation was built on solid rock.

And there's something else to remember about Jesus, my friend. Jesus is not phased in the least by storms. Jesus is the one who has the power to rebuke the wind and the waves, to say, "Peace, be still." And as the old hymn says, "The soul that on Jesus hath leaned for repose, I will not, I will not desert to its foes. That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no never, no never forsake."

V

And so we live out our discipleship together as First Presbyterian Church, we are all living through the storm of the global pandemic. Not only is the pandemic

testing the foundations of our healthcare system, it is also severely testing the foundations of our common public life.

From time to time, I wander out to the narthex and look at the plaques that hang there on the wall, and I think about the pastors and elders and faithful women and men who came before us in this church. It gives me comfort to think about how this church has continued to bear witness to Christ here in Athens and beyond through times of war and times of peace, times of hardship and times of prosperity. First Presbyterian Church has endured her share of stormy days over the course of 200 years.

And I am convinced that we are still standing, is because by God's grace, our forbearers built this ministry on the foundation of hearing and acting on Christ's words.

By no means have we done it perfectly. There's no such thing as a perfect Christian, and of course there's no such thing as a perfect church. Our forbearers were wrong about many things that at the time, they thought they had gotten exactly right. And spoiler alert, someday our descendants might say the same thing about us. There's no such thing as a perfect Christian, just a forgiven one.

And so over the years, the rain has fallen, and the floods have come, and the winds have blown and beaten on this house, but it has not fallen, because it was built on rock.

And storms don't last forever. This pandemic will end, just as every pandemic in human history has before it. The bonds of our democracy have been severely tested before, and I pray with all that I am that our democracy will survive this storm, too. These storms we are living through, severe as they are, will come to an end.

But we know that others will come after them. The rains will fall, and the floodwaters will rise, and the winds will blow, and you can take it to the bank that the foundation will be tested again.

And as the saying goes, past performance is not a guarantee of future results. If we ever start focusing more on our past and preserving an institution than we focus on building a movement around on hearing and acting on Christ's words, we'll have foundation problems.

The world around us is changing rapidly, and the century that is before us will be a very different context for ministry than the two centuries that preceded it.

The people out there, and the generations that are coming behind them, they're standing there in the middle of the storm. They're standing there as people rebuke one another over something as simple as wearing a piece of cloth over the mouth and nose in the middle of a deadly worldwide pandemic. They're standing there as our leaders are often more interested in generating clicks and sound bytes than finding common ground and solving problems.

They're standing there as the rains are falling and the winds are howling, and the water is rising, and whether they know or not, they're asking with every fiber of their being, "Does the gospel make a difference?"

And so let me ask you, church: Does it? Does the life, death, and resurrection of a first-century rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth make a difference? Are we still willing to build the foundation of this house on the rock by hearing Christ's words and acting on them?

If we are still willing to build the foundation on the rock, I me offer you a challenge and an invitation today. In honor of the saints who have gone before us, and in profound gratitude to God for God's providence and grace, I challenge you over the next 52 weeks to find 200 ways to bless the people of God who are outside this church.

Remember, offering blessing doesn't have to be a big, huge thing. In the 25th chapter of Matthew's gospel, Jesus said that if you offer so much as a cup of cold water to the least of these who are members of his family, you've done it unto him.

What might 200 blessings look like to you? Maybe for you, it's as simple as making eye contact and offering a smile to that person standing on the street corner. Maybe for you, offering a blessing looks like instead of rebuking that person who is on the other side of an argument, instead offering a silent prayer for them that they might be

filled with everything that you want in life: peace and security and prosperity and joy.

Maybe for you, it's as simple as making a phone call or writing a note to someone who is homebound or shut in and hasn't had a visitor in weeks.

Maybe your blessing is as simple as spending an afternoon helping Family Promise prepare for the night's guests. Maybe your blessing reading to children at your local elementary school. Maybe your blessing is sending note of encouragement and affirmation to a young person. Maybe your blessing is finding a simple way to say thank you to the doctors and nurses and hospital staff who are utterly exhausted. Maybe your blessing is as simple as literally offering a cup of cold water on a hot summer day.

What would it look like, friends, if First Presbyterian Church of Athens got serious about being a blessing in and for this community for the next 52 weeks?

These are difficult days in our community, our state, and in our nation. The storms have been raging all around us. But in weeks like these, I am mindful and grateful of the words of a Baptist Georgia preacher who knew something about hearing Christ's words and acting on them. He said,

Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. Hate multiplies hate, violence multiplies violence, and toughness multiplies

toughness in a descending spiral of destruction.

Hate multiplies hate. Violence multiplies violence. Toughness multiplies toughness.

But I wonder, friends? What if the opposite is true? What if blessings multiply blessings? What if love multiplies love? What would it look like if all of us gathered here today spent the next year showering 200 blessings apiece on our community?

Might it begin to look a little something like the kingdom of God, right here in Athens, Georgia?

May it be so. Amen.