

## **Solid Foundation**

Menno Mennonite Church

June 12, 2022

**Purpose:** To revisit the foundational nature of the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount.

**Message:** As followers of Christ, we do well to visit our foundations regularly, hearing their challenge and considering their invitations for the present.

**Scripture:** Matthew 7:15-29 [I will read]; Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (please read/have read)

**Synopsis:** Often as we approach faith and life, we can easily concentrate on the right way of life (know to us theological types as orthopraxy). It can be easy to become separated from the foundation that underlies why we do what we do. For us as Anabaptists, we base a great deal of what we do and what we are from the words of Christ, especially those of the sermon on the mount. These text in Matthew are cited again and again throughout our confession of faith. Yet, we easily ignore them because here too lies some of the tough sayings of Christ, calling us to a new way of life and a new way of being. In this series we are going to look at foundational elements of why we do what we do, why we believe what we believe, connecting again to the core of our faith and our practice.

*This is the launching sermon of a summer series on the Sermon on the Mount*

Matthew 7:15–29 (NRSV)

<sup>15</sup>“Beware of false prophets,  
who come to you in sheep’s clothing  
but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

<sup>16</sup>You will know them by their fruits.

Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?

<sup>17</sup>In the same way,  
every good tree bears good fruit,  
but the bad tree bears bad fruit.

<sup>18</sup>A good tree cannot bear bad fruit,  
nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.

<sup>19</sup>Every tree that does not bear good fruit  
is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>20</sup>Thus you will know them by their fruits.

<sup>21</sup>“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.

<sup>22</sup>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?’

<sup>23</sup>Then I will declare to them,  
‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

<sup>24</sup>“Everyone then who hears these words of mine  
and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock.

<sup>25</sup>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.

<sup>26</sup>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.

<sup>27</sup>The rain fell, and the floods came,  
and the winds blew and beat against that house,  
and it fell—and great was its fall!”

<sup>28</sup>Now when Jesus had finished saying these things,  
the crowds were astounded at his teaching,  
<sup>29</sup>for he taught them as one having authority,  
and not as their scribes.

There are questions in life that cut to the core. They are the essential ponderings of life, and speak to the places where the rubber hits the road. There is rarely any good way to answer them, and bring, hopefully our way and our beliefs into stark relief. Some are broad—what do we want of God? How do we expect life to be lived to our healing and benefit? What are the things that we are willing to sacrifice all that we have for: our Children? Our Spouse? Our country? The ability to succeed certainly and fully? For what are we willing to die? For what are we willing to kill? When and how? What if anything does our faith have to say about these things, no matter how we interpret what we find there.

There is more outside the pragmatic. What are the things that bring life its full meaning? What, really, is important to us, to God at the end of the day? What does it mean to love God and love our neighbor? What is the nature of the kingdom, and how might we work at seeking it? What does the call of service really mean to us and where might it take us? The list goes on and on. These are foundational questions: one which we may well have answers to, or think that we do easily and well enough, but are far more prickly and complicated to consider time too readily. While we likely don't spend a huge amount of time considering these foundational issues, that doesn't mean they are not important. From the time when we might be formulating what is our response relative to what we might have grown up with, on down to the questions of older age, it is our foundations that speak to who we are, how we live, and who we want to be. We might think of these as the big dorm room conversations—awfully and critically important at the time, but relative to the day-to-day demands of getting on with life, not all that central. Yet would hold the sitting with the foundational stuff that we are brought back to the beginning of our faith, our ways of thinking and the ways that faith an life works, and that is always important.

Because we know that most of the time our stained-glass images of the life of faith and those who lead that life fails to match our realities. Jesus' teaching, as interesting as it may be often struggles to translate itself into modern life, certainly not always in the plain and simple ways that we might wish that they did. Encountering the words of Christ as we so often do as the small digestible snippets of quotations and wisdom selected to fit the time of a teaching or to prove and argument, it can be hard to know how to fit them all in. This is certainly true of the sermon on the mount. When you sit down and read it together, you see not only all the red letters, this long discourse of Jesus, but all the litany of hot button issues that are covered along the way—divorce, adultery, revenge, anger, judgement. All the stuff within the canon of human

behavior that we might just as soon leave well outside the walls of the church, but are the stuff of human life and living. When we see the pastoral depictions of these words being spoken, seldom do we see the natural reactions that we might expect—the incredulity and the struggle of hearing challenging things. The wonder of these teachings, and the despair that they might rightly bring to our hearts. This is Jesus dropping the nuance and speaking to the places where people live and where their faith is founded. No wonder that the whole thing wraps up with this analogy of two houses being built in different ways. It was that earth shaking and foundation rattling.

Which is why we want to spend time this summer with this teaching of the sermon on the Mount. While it is true that, from a historic perspective it is thought unlikely this was one address laid out with Matthew standing by as court recorder, that is how we often think about it, but seldom engage it in that way. Within the lectionary, the slate of weekly readings of the mainline church that we often engage to consider what to preach on when, we only encounter the sermon—Matthew’s version in any case—once every three years, and only then with some notable omissions. We sit with the openings and the familiar portions of the Beatitudes and the rest. But other texts are left out, most notably some of those around which Anabaptists are most attracted and engaged like the end of Chapter 5 and the description of how to love our enemies. Not that I particularly blame anyone for avoiding some of this. There is enough of the tough sayings of Jesus to inspire a change of scenery if one is allowed.

So why this, why now and why do we want us to sit here in the midst of summer and its demands? First of all, this is our text, our words. These are teachings that lie at the center of an Anabaptist way of thinking about faith. If you go back to the early Anabaptists, people like Menno Simons, Hubmeier, Hans Hut, Michael Sattler and the like, these notions lie at the center of their arguments and their thoughts about how to be church and what it means to be a follower of Christ. When we say that Jesus Christ is the center of our faith, this is what we mean by it, holding firmly that Jesus had more to do and say than simply being born of Mary, being Crucified by Pontius Pilot, Buried and raised on the third day as the creeds would tell it. We would hold that there is more—much more, and that it is this that matters. We have always read the bible not as a single flat document, but a document that places the teachings of Christ at the center, with priority and relevance with in all else. As the central teachings of Jesus’ ministry, the sermon can be considered the pinnacle of the heights. Within the confession of faith from a Mennonite understanding, the document that explains what it is that Anabaptists generally

believe, the Sermon on the Mount is cited 22 times within the 24 articles (and that is only counting Matthew's version). It is part of our DNA and we do well to hold on to that and examine it well and know its power to shape.

Secondly, I think it is good to come to the struggle now and again. As easy as it is to allow the settled bedrock well alone and unexamined, we gain much from looking at it from time to time. For knowing this we can be reminded of and shaped by our principles time and again, or consider what this might look like for us today in this world and this reality. I don't expect grand revelations or mass conversions of thought, but touching base helps us clarify our thinking and live differently for it. Knowing our foundations allows us to build and keep building accordingly.

Third, I think we do we to do this as we consider what it is that we pass on. Often, we become reliant on culture and tradition to do the work of forming faith and bringing the generations on behind us that the conversations of "yes, but why" doesn't really happen in a way that gets into the messy topics. For you younger among us here—understand, it is not that we come to this with easy answers or demanding expectations. I don't think there would be anyone here before you that would call this easy or take this for granted. However, sitting again with these ideas opens the opportunity to ask the questions, and more particularly, hear the stories of the ways that these teachings and the way that they have been lived in us and through us and how that has shaped Menno and those around us.

Growing up, I was all about the sandbox. That was my happy place. I would spend hours with pail and tonka truck in hand building out my universe. It would usually start with something simple, a road through the dune like wilderness. And then where there is a road, a town usually followed with farms and fields, then houses and skyscrapers of a thriving metropolis. Usually, after that would follow the beautiful, but tragically ill placed reservoir on the heights overlooking my thriving little burg full of unsuspecting citizens below. Apparently, civil engineering was an undervalued profession in my little world, and the dam holding back the impending flood almost always crumbled, subjecting the town below to untold devastation. One more reason on the long list of why it is good that Bryce is not omnipotent.

But as I built time and again, I began to learn. I saw what worked and what failed. The ways that things could hold together that much longer from my engineered onslaught. I would work with sand water and time to make the best structures I could and shape them each way,

learning that what lay at the core often mattered the most by far. The more I worked, paid attention and experimented, the more I knew the foundations and the way that they held and shaped and moved that which I was trying to create.

So it is with us. Jesus wraps things up to make the point that the stuff of loving God in the ways we want and the ways that we ought to say far more about us than any policy that we might articulate or worship we can profess. All the time, he is asking then that which he has never stopped asking his disciples: where does your foundation lie? How are you rooted?

Where is your foundation? On what is your faith built? Out of what do your hopes rise. These are familiar questions yes, and an even more familiar metaphor (we even have our Sunday School songs about it) but important questions all the same, because it is in going back to basics, back to our foundation, that we can move forward, make changes, reminded of the questions that really matter, strengthened to grow into all that God is calling us to be.

In the coming weeks, we will be looking at Jesus' manifesto of the kingdom, our core, our roots, our foundation. As we sit again on the mountain and ask the essential questions of what it is to live a life in Christ, may we be given eyes to see the way of Kingdom, feet to walk in new ways in the new kingdom and ears to hear what Jesus is teaching us about ourselves, our roots, our foundations for these days and this life.