

Proper 4, A

June 1, 2008

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my strength and my redeemer. AMEN.

Today we are observing the 120th anniversary of the organization of our parish. So often when we speak about church, it's the buildings that usually what flashes in our mind's eye. For some of us, the image of the Chapel is the most memorable symbol of the parish. For others the mention of St. Paul's Episcopal Church brings other images to mind.

It is interesting to note our anniversary today, because our Gospel sounds like we need to pay attention to our method and choice for building. We have much for which to be thankful. The people from whom we inherited this property worked tirelessly to maintain our buildings and grounds and we will do the same. BTW, Thank you to the Wardens and Vestry for sponsoring the flowers for this occasion.

We have built our hope on solid ground as a congregation. Even though Jesus used a parable about building houses, I think we can agree that he had another kind of construction in mind. It is more about how we choose live out the life God has given us.

An elderly woman walked up to a little old man rocking in a chair on his porch. Though he looked weathered and feeble, he had a content smile on his face.

"I couldn't help noticing how happy you look," she said. "What's your secret for a happy life?" "Well, I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day," he said, waving a wrinkled hand through the air, with a smoldering cigarette between his thumb and finger. "I also drink a case of whiskey a week, eat fatty foods, and never exercise." "That's amazing!" said the woman. "So, how old are you?" "Twenty□six," he answered.

Is that the kind of building Jesus is talking about in the Gospel? And if so, then what kind of a body are you building? Maintaining a healthy lifestyle is an important part of life, but I would venture to say that in today's Gospel, Jesus is not so concerned about actual buildings or our calories or exercise regimens. I think he's asking us about something deeper. This Gospel is not just about buildings, or our bodies, but more importantly, it's about what we are building our lives on.

You see, our actions are what Jesus Christ is interested in seeing. Our actions are what truly define us. That is what will ultimately show what our lives are about. That's what really shows our intentions. It seems that the Gospel challenge is that words alone are not enough evidence of the level of commitment that Jesus seeks from us. Words can be slippery things—you've seen lots of examples thanks to the political season we are experiencing.

So Jesus says that those who make *verbal* claims about their commitment to live as Jesus asks are like the people who build their houses on sand. The floodwaters and stormy winds can easily destroy them. But, those who show their commitment by their actions are like the people who built their houses with a stone foundation. When the rough winds and threatening waters came their houses stood firm. What are you building your life around?

I read a story about a well-known and well-respected psychiatrist named Milton Erickson who was once asked to counsel an elderly woman who was quite depressed. Erickson went by her home. During the visit Erickson noticed three well cared for African violets. Each was a different color and next to them was an empty pot in which this woman was clearly going to propagate another plant.

This lady was a talented horticulturist. Erickson said he wanted to prescribe something for her feelings of depression, but before he did so, he wanted her word that she would fill it. She agreed. Before he ended his session with her Erickson said, “Depression isn’t your problem. Your problem is that you aren’t being a very good Christian!” The woman was startled. “What do you mean?” she responded. Then he pointed out her talent for growing African violets. It was a gift she was keeping to herself.

He told her your prescription is to purchase pots and transplant leaves to grow more of these beautiful plants. When she had an adequate supply he wanted her to send one of these violets to the mother of every baby born to a member of her church. Then she was to send one to every member of her church who was hospitalized.

After he left, she began to think about what he had said. She decided to keep her word and give it a try. She took an African violet to a friend who had recently lost her husband. Then another to a family who just had a new baby. Soon this became a regular part of her life.

About ten years later, an article appeared in the local paper. It was titled, “African Violet Queen Dies--Mourned by Thousands.” Evidently, by living out her Christian faith and sharing her talent for growing African violets with others, this woman discovered a meaningful and satisfying life.

Living with a purpose, living to be of service to others, building our lives around the principles that Jesus teaches us, are what strong lives are built upon. That’s a “house built on rocks”. So often we feel that we don’t need advice from God for how we live our lives and that is fine. But just know that what Jesus teaches about love, forgiveness, and reconciliation, cannot be improved upon.

Perhaps you know people whose lives seem to be all that one could hope for. It may appear that nothing is lacking in their lives. Yet, I’ve heard the story of a very successful person who retired very young after reaching the financial goals for which he had aspired. After a few years of doing whatever he pleased he became bored and frustrated.

One day he went to a church and heard today’s Gospel scripture and he realized that even though he wasn’t doing anything wrong in his life, he also wasn’t doing anything right either. What he discovered was that it isn’t enough just not to do bad, but that a truly fulfilling life comes when we do good for others. So he went back to work to discover purpose and he began to develop ways of helping others. That is how he found meaning in his life.

We each have the chance to live our lives in happiness and peace *and* if we keep to the advice given to us by Jesus, we will not experience challenges and trials in the same way. There is no way that we will live life without facing crises challenges, and heartbreak. What Jesus offers us is not about a way escaping these trials, but Jesus offers us a way to rise above them.

Living as a Christian does not give us a free pass from pain, but gives us a way to make something good come from even the bad stuff. We can ignore the principles that Jesus teaches us, but we’ll find no equal in other ways of life.

It’s up to you. I hope you’ll choose to make a firm and demonstrable commitment to live as Jesus taught us. Thinking about it, and/or merely *saying* you follow Jesus, is meaningless—our strength and ability to live full and purposeful lives comes only from actually *living out* the principles of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, hope, sacrifice, and service to others.

You’ve heard the old saying and it is entirely appropriate here: “*Actions speak louder than words.*” AMEN.