

June 1, 2008

Third Sunday After Pentecost, Year A, Proper 4 (Matthew 7:21-29)

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Ga.

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A former teacher of mine used to say 'when things start going well, watch out.' He was aware that the reality in which we live is changing all the time, and that God will often seem to shake things up when we become too sure of ourselves, too confident, too satisfied. I'm sure that most of you have had an experience that you have described as like having the rug pulled from under your feet, or the wind knocked out of you, or perhaps hitting bottom. I'm talking about those times when we know with every fiber of our being that life can and will never be the same again. I'm talking about those times when something about who we are and how we understand our place in the world has changed for ever.

Such are the times when we have to learn or remember that the only real rock on which we can build with confidence is God and everything else is a foundation of shifting sand. This sounds counter-intuitive as we all know how elusive and ephemeral our experience of God can be, but it turns out to be true.

There are any number of sandy foundations on which we build but the trickiest of all are those that have to do with *belief*, our beliefs about God and our beliefs about ourselves.

I remember a time when my whole world changed and there is a sense in which I am still working out the implications of that change. Another teacher of mine was trying to introduce what he called 'a theological theory of relativity'. As I began to take on board the implication of his thought, I found myself saying, "If I'm following what you are saying correctly, then what happens to Truth?" I had always assumed that truth was one of those objective and immutable things that we had to discover, and once we discovered truth, we were home free. This teacher was suggesting that what I thought was as solid as rock was really a foundation of sand, and that what I was calling Truth or Reality or God's Plan was really a much more mysterious and complicated thing than I had imagined.

It was one of those 'Oh No' moments of my life, a time when I knew that nothing would ever be the same for me again. As I look back, it was probably what allowed me to make a transition from a kind of limiting evangelicism to a much more graceful understanding and experience of God, a transition that many of my friends from those days were unable to make. Some are hanging on to their beliefs for dear life while others have rejected the faith altogether as their beliefs seemed to be shifting sand. For me, the crumbling of my constructs allowed room for what was to become a sustainable faith or trust in God.

A similar but more recent experience of having my world changed for ever had to do with beliefs about myself. I had thought of myself as pretty good at what I do, fairly 'together,' able to make tough decisions, not an overwhelmingly dreadful person, reasonably attractive...you get the picture. About four years ago in the summer I learned

that a friend and contemporary of mine had been found dead in his New York apartment. I was not unfamiliar with death, even the death of people I loved, but something about this one brought everything crashing down for me. It wasn't just the loss of my friend, of course, although that was a big piece of my grief. It was about all kinds of endings: the ending of my marriage, the ending of my sense of self as somehow 'golden', the ending of my sense that all was basically well with the world, and so on. Some of these endings had been underway for some time, but Jonathon's death marked a real low point, a kind of 'hitting bottom' for me, and I knew that I was going to have to re-build everything and that it would take a long, long time. My own image of myself and one that had served pretty well in a number of ways was still built on an foundation of sand and sober reconstruction on the only true foundation that I am a beloved child of God as are each of you, and that is the only thing that really matters in the end. This became a rediscovery that I really am forgiven, loved and free.

The only real foundation on which we can and should build is not our *beliefs* about God or about ourselves, but on the reality of the living God who is revealed most fully in Jesus' life and teaching and whom we sometimes talk of as the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus comes to the end of the Sermon on the Mount he says *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.* He goes on to say that those who hear his words and act on them is like a person who builds his house on a rock.

Brothers and sisters, in a time of silence for prayer I invite you to resolve once again to build your house on the rock that is God and to hear and act on the words of Jesus, walking in love as God loves us.