

An Imperfect Base
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection: *The loftier the building, the deeper must the foundation be laid.*
a Kempis

Thomas

Hebrew Scripture Reading: *Psalm 124*

¹If it had not been the LORD who was on our side—let Israel now say—
²if it had not been the LORD who was on our side, when our enemies attacked us,
³then they would have swallowed us up alive, when their anger was kindled against us;
⁴then the flood would have swept us away, the torrent would have gone over us;
⁵then over us would have gone the raging waters.
⁶Blessed be the LORD, who has not given us as prey to their teeth.
⁷We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers; the snare is broken, and we have escaped.
⁸Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth.

Gospel Reading: *Matthew 16:13-20*

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” ¹⁴And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” ¹⁵He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” ¹⁶Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Meditation

An Imperfect Base

Rev. Dr. Linda D. Even

I've learned a lot about building on rock and with rock since I bought my house in New York. The first lessons came when Scott Manuel and I were replacing a stretch of cedar fence that had failed with age. We discovered that the original fence was not, in fact, the original fence, but had been established in the midst of an old fieldstone wall, now nearly buried in nearly a century's worth of soil and decay. As we struggled to find footing both for ourselves and the new fence, we were struck by the skill of the people who managed to put a wooden fence on top of it—even if it only lasted 30 years. The stone wall's structure had certainly outlasted the cedar. (I hired professionals when it was time to replace the entire fence:-))

The next lessons came as I implemented my plans for gardens. I am an amateur landscaper and gardener and have gradually converted my yard to perennial beds. Making those changes on property that has been occupied and had trees growing on it for close to a century presented its own challenges. Over time, I learned to discern whether the hard spot I have struck was a stone that could be dug up and used artfully in another place or was an immovable, deeply embedded rock that became a garden feature.

Perhaps those relatively small tasks were preparing me for the rockiest. Mine is a raised lot, held in place by shale retaining walls. The single car garage is entered by a driveway sided by walls that are shoulder high. When I had time to notice such things, I noticed the walls canted inward at an alarming degree. In 2017 I decided to deconstruct and reconstruct two eight-foot-long by five-foot-high sections of wall on either side of the garage. How hard could stacking flat rocks be?

I took down the first section and stacked the rocks along the edge of the driveway, looked at what I had done and began to meditate, my mantra being "What have I done? What have I done?"

The first task was to dig out some of the soil so that the wall could be moved back. Then came the question about what to do with the extra soil (perennial beds) and the softball-sized fieldstones behind the retaining walls to help water percolate through the soil. I had inherited three small gardens that could be watered only by rain or by carrying water to them. In my household, that means, they are watered by rain. Those gardens became rock gardens filled with softball-sized fieldstone.

Then came the easy task of restacking those flat pieces of shale, being sure the wall canted into the lot, not away from it. Although I had personally removed each rock from the wall, it wasn't until I started to put them back that reality struck: They were not flat. They were not uniformly shaped, one to another, and each one was irregularly shaped. There were variations in thickness within and among the rocks, end to end and front to back. There were times when a rock would have fit perfectly, if only it were a shade thinner or thicker on one end, or not quite as deep. However, frangible shale doesn't lend itself to having a layer or two peeled off at your behest. And whatever misbegotten person had attempted over time to pour wet concrete into the wall had discovered you couldn't make them thicker or longer or wider.

Yet, as unyielding as the rock appeared to be, if a piece were dropped, it was likely to shatter into a dozen pieces, not of immediately apparent use. Some of those fractured pieces made nice shims to stabilize other rocks and some of them went behind the wall to form the necessary water-percolating background. Rebuilding the wall was like putting together a puzzle without the picture.

That project rose as a particularly visceral memory as I prepared this sermon. I recently noticed that another ten-foot section of the wall is going to need restacking before it falls into the street. (So, if you are wondering what I will be doing in retirement...)

My thoughts bounced between that project and our text. I wondered about Jesus' choice of rock for a church base. We've gotten sentimental over the millennia about the quality of that rock—assuming it was granite, not sandstone, something that wouldn't crumble under its own weight or be easily eroded by water...curious assumptions, given Peter's erratic history as a disciple who boldly proclaimed the Messiah, but also ran, hid, and lied when the occasion demanded.

Yet, surely rock, any rock, is a better base than the shifting sands of a parable. Rock gives the impression and the reality of strength, security and endurance. All to the good. It might have been better if Jesus said he was building a monument out of one big rock, instead of a church with it as its base.

But Jesus wasn't talking about building a building, where mortar, architecture, leverage and power tools are in use. He was talking about something far more challenging than piling together the carefully formed bricks made by Egyptian slaves or the uniformly chiseled blocks mocked by the prophets.

He was talking about building a community—about stacking walls of people within and across generations—people with shared goals and calling of faith, but people of different shapes, sizes and colors; of different strengths and make-up, all into an enduring edifice that would carry Christ's message and works through the ages. He was talking about building something that was strong enough to endure, while allowing the Spirit to percolate through it and all its members. He knew some of the building stones would need the support of their neighbors, some would be broken, some would need find new roles and that nothing, but the Lord God, endures forever.

For the most part, the Church in the world has gotten that building right over the millennia. Where we fail, where we frustrate ourselves and the world is when we rely too much on the strength and endurance of rock, forgetting three things about the limits of structures made of rock:

- 1) Strength and endurance can become inflexibility and rigidity. If ever the church has failed or now fails the world, it's in its rigid perception of what holding the keys to heaven meant or what it was supposed to mean; being certain it knows what can be forgiven and what can't. We fail when we forget that Jesus focused on opening doors, not locking them and when we fail to use the keys as Jesus would have.
- 2) That strength and endurance can form a blockade which, over time, is blocked by debris, so that new ideas and new works of the Spirit cannot percolate through the structure. The Spirit will always out, at best, causing bulges and weak spots; at worst, bursting through and destroying a section of the edifice.
- 3) That strength and endurance do not mean immortality. Eventually even the best-built structures of stone will develop weak spots, crumble from use or need repair. The work of deconstructing and reconstructing can be discouraging and seem at times overwhelming. In some moments it can seem a denial of all the work and disrespect for the people who have gone before.

Yet, such work, never means destroying or devaluing what has been. It invites reflection, allowing for the consideration of the value, shape and work of each stone; it provides the opportunity for changing places in the base, deploying gifts differently; for reshaping and repurposing the edifice for effective work in the world today; and above all, allows for the reopening of the channels of the Spirit to move the building in life-giving ways. While it is, at times, tedious labor, it also requires creativity and imagination, and provides a sense of accomplishment in the doing.

As we reflect on why Jesus chose rock, and which rock Jesus chose to build on, while it is too early for specifics, it is time for the congregation to begin to reflect how it might build, rebuild and build anew with the materials he decreed we work with, even as he still works with the imperfect base that is who we are and who faithful humans have always been.

Prayers for Others and Ourselves

Healing God: We come together, comforted by the knowledge that we are indeed your people. Yet it is a knowledge that needs daily and weekly refreshing from your word, from the signs and symbols of our faith, and from the connections with all those you have called to be your family in this place.

In the complicated and busy days of our lives, we are glad for the simple pleasures of our days – smiles of greeting, hugs of welcome, kind words, gentle deeds, and shared meals. We take this moment to thank you, not only for these things, but that you have created us to enjoy them.

...

In the overlapping layers of responsibility for family, friends, church, community, and schools, and all the communities of need where we are a part, we often find ourselves lost and without focus, as we seek to care for those around us. In this moment, help us to find our center and you at its core.

...

From this center of gratitude and presence, we pray for our world

For the people in our country and around the world recovering from flooding and storms, who have lost homes, livelihoods and family members,

for the cleanup that awaits,

for the first second and third responders that will rescue heal and rebuild...

For our nation as we continue to grapple with the racism, violence and fear that has beset our country from its beginning and rear their heads again and again. Grant us and all our fellow citizens, wisdom and hope to build a new future together, where healing, trust and hope are the base on which we build ...

Knowing that you are with us, gifting us and blessing us, soothing us and guiding us with your Spirit, we go forward in faith and trust, as your son's hands and feet and heart in the world, loving and healing as you have loved and healed us.

For we ask it in Christ's name, who taught us to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.**

Give us this day, our daily bread.

**Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,**

**for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**