

"But Wait ... There's More!" Gen. 6:11-22, 7:25; 8:14-19; Ps. 46;
Matthew 7:21-29
Chapel Lane Presbyterian Church
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It seems somehow fitting that on a day when we are celebrating the culmination of a time of study and learning, honoring our graduates who are about to embark on new endeavors, that we should be given a text from Matthew's gospel that marks the end of Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. He has been teaching his disciples and the many who gathered to hear his words. His teachings have included such things as the Beatitudes, the Golden Rule, how to pray and the words of the Lord's Prayer, forgiveness, how to give alms, what it means to fulfill the law of God, loving your enemies, and warnings against judging others.

After all these teachings it's as though the disciples and the crowd are at the end of a series of lectures and they are graduating on to other things.

How will they make use of what they have learned? Will his lessons be more than just notes on a page or words that they have heard and can recite back?

Perhaps it is in anticipation of how his words might be used that Jesus tells them (in so many words) that just taking good notes and learning the right words to say, even learning to call him "Lord", isn't going to be enough to guarantee a passing grade in the kingdom of God.

In this election season we've all heard plenty of political rhetoric. Politicians who only say what they know the crowd wants to hear

without the actions that go along with their lofty words are soon looked upon with suspicion and disdain.

The same holds true for people of faith. Just saying what we think Jesus wants to hear, just professing faith in him as "Lord" doesn't win us any points with him.

The things we've learned and the words we recite are important, but wait, there's more. If the "more" in this case means putting our faith into action and doing things in the name of Jesus, then what he says next will really cause us to think again.

According to Jesus, following him faithfully is more than just doing great things like prophesying and casting out demons in his name. Invoking his name and performing amazing deeds won't be enough to keep us from being labeled "evildoers" by Jesus.

Wow! That seems harsh. And I thought that prophesying and exorcising demons would be clear signs that we had made the grade and were on a spiritual plane far superior to other "mere" followers of Christ!

But, even spectacular deeds done in Jesus' name aren't going to count toward our passing grade. What is Jesus trying to do?

Jesus then goes on to tell them a parable about two builders. He draws a connection between where they chose to build with how they chose to live out their faith. For the one who chose to do God's will by acting as a person of faith, it is like building on the rock. Striving to do God's will leads to security, not just in this life, but in the life to come.

On the other hand, choosing not to try to do God's will - - choosing not to act as a person of faith - - is like not paying attention to where we choose to build our house. There is no stability or security against the storms of life, no matter how ornate or beautiful the dwelling that sits above the foundation may be.

Of course, building on the rock doesn't protect us from the storms of life. The rains and the floods and the storms beat equally upon both houses in Jesus' story. But the house that was built on the foundation of acting on the words that Jesus teaches us was the house that had a firm foundation.

And that's it. That's where the great Sermon on the Mount ends. The disciples and the rest of the crowd close their notebooks. Jesus, the professor, doesn't end by asking them, "So, does anyone have any questions?" Matthew tells us the people were in awe and amazed by his teaching because of its authority. There was something about his teachings that had the ring of truth. It was the voice of God in the midst of them and they could recognize it.

But recognizing the authority in Jesus' teachings and acting upon it are two very different things. We are called to live out his message. First and foremost Jesus is preaching an ethic of action. It isn't enough to know who he is without living out his message of love and forgiveness, justice and peace built on the foundation of trust in God's sovereign will.

It isn't enough to think we are doing great things for God if, in reality, we're really only doing them to get noticed, to get applause, to get stars in our crown. If our ministry points more to us than to the God who motivates and inspires us then we have

a spiritual problem and what we are doing is labeled as "evil" in Jesus' eyes.

This passage from Matthew began with Jesus equating salvation with acting on our faith, living it out, "doing the will of God". In a different gospel, in the Gospel of John, the people ask Jesus a direct question. They ask: "What must we do to be doing the will of God?" And his answer: "Believe in God and in the one whom he has sent". (John 6:28-29) Our main action is to believe in God and to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Once we have claimed that truth for ourselves everything else comes into line.

We cannot believe that Jesus is truly the Messiah, the one sent from God as savior and Lord without taking his teachings to heart and believing that what he said is true too.

We cannot be satisfied with knowing the Scriptures and being able to recite creeds and sing hymns and enjoy fellowship with one another without having a heart that aches for those who are in pain, in grief, those dealing with devastating losses and hardship, and then deciding to try to do something to alleviate the suffering of others.

To be doing the will of God is to have a focus on sisters and brothers who are in need, not as a seasonal activity but as a regular part of who we are and what we say is important to us because of the love that God has poured into our hearts.

To be doing the will of God is not to focus upon the splashy acts of discipleship but the less obvious, but no less important acts that define our character as Christians. These things matter.

It matters how we act in season and out of season, when others are looking on and when no one is looking. It's a matter of Christian character.

Many of our young people are very adept at the internet. They have facebook pages and blogs and it has been interesting to see how some of those entries have come back to haunt some of them, especially when they find out that prospective employers and admissions officers at schools can gain access to those entries too.

Being people of character, people who demonstrate consistency in our words and our deeds is important. How we behave when we are far from those who know us, far from those who might call us to task, is critical.

The good news is that many of us are concerned about how we put our faith into practice. We know that it isn't just what we know but what we do based on what we know.

It is the practical application of our learning that matters. It is no less important when we are learning a new skill than when we are striving to be doing the will of God.

But wait, there's more. Having come this far in our education and in life we know there is a whole world out there ahead of us, yearning for the gifts we have to give, anxious to see the difference we will make, hoping that whatever field of study or vocation we pursue will be built on a foundation of acting out our faith, living as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Our calling, in biblical terms, is to bear fruit. The image of the tree bearing fruit is often used as a symbol of a person who purts

their faith into practice. The tree doesn't bear fruit because it is afraid of what will happen if it doesn't. It doesn't bear fruit to be noticed. It doesn't bear fruit because someone commanded it to bear fruit.

It bears fruit simply because that's what it does. It is connected to the foundation and draws its nourishment from being rooted and planted in good soil. Its fruit appears as naturally as the sun that rose this morning and will set tonight.

We too have been planted in good soil. We will draw our strength from God's word, from the spiritual nourishment of the Lord's Table, from regular worship and fellowship.

Let us put the things we have learned into practice and trust that God will be with us like a firm foundation to support us and to enable us to grow to ever greater heights of service as we engage our hearts and our heads and our hands in living out the love we have known and received in Christ Jesus our Lord.

May it be so for us. Amen.