

The Solid Foundation

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Matthew 7: 21-29

When a suitcase full of money seemingly falls out of the sky collapsing the fortress he'd made out of cardboard boxes down by the railroad tracks, 7 year-old Damian just assumes it's from God. It just seems to go along with who he knows God to be, a Giver of good things, One who blesses the poor and the poor in spirit, One who comforts the grieving. Young Damian has "visions" or at least a vivid imagination, through which he often sees and converses with various saints from down through the ages. And, whenever he is conversing with one or another of them he always asks if they know a St. Maureen. Maureen was Damian's mother who has recently died, leaving Damian, his 9 year-old brother Anthony, and their father each dealing with their grief in different ways, trying to find a new life without her. Damian misses her, and he's sure she must now have become a saint. That would also go along with who he knows God to be, and who he knew his mother to be.

These folks are characters in the movie "Millions" which is now playing in some theaters. As Damian and his brother Anthony disagree over what best to do with all this money they've found, Anthony wants to use it for "stuff" and for gaining status with his friends. For Damian what makes all the difference is that he believes it's something God has done. A miracle. Damian sets about trying his best to find poor people to give it to.

When, throughout the course of the movie, he realizes that some pretty nasty people, robbers, also had a lot to do with that suitcase of money landing on Damian's fort, it complicates things. But, even so, it doesn't seem to change who Damian is, or who he seemingly believes God to be. Because he keeps talking with the saints. He stays in relationship with the sacred as he tries to figure it all out. Even at age seven his life seems to have a pretty solid foundation.

That's not an easy thing, whether we're Christian or not, and apparently never has been. Matthew's church obviously existed amidst conflicting ideas about what it meant to be Christian. Matthew in particular, felt constrained to present the gospel message in a way that Jewish Christians (his community) could more easily appropriate. And like we know from the apostle Paul's correspondence, that task involved the cutting of a middle road between those on the one hand who wanted to emphasize a very legalistic, literalistic, demanding way of interpreting scripture and leading the "religious" life, and those on the other hand, who seemingly cared nothing about any ethical concerns of life in community, but were into elevating their standing because of their possession and use of what they considered the more "spiritual" gifts.

These words of Jesus, coming at the end of what is known as the Sermon on the Mount, would have had a lot of power in that situation. He pictures thousands of Christians saying to Jesus, "Lord, we preached the gospel, we prophesied, we bashed the demons, we did lots of great works in your name, Lord." And says Jesus to these Christians, "I never knew you." "All you did was use me to make yourselves important." Says Jesus, "Not everyone who says, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the Kingdom." "Go away from me, you evildoers."

Those who preached the gospel, and cast out demons, and did lots of great things in the name of Jesus, evildoers? They would have been very powerful words in Matthew's community. They are still powerful words, in our community. Because all those same interpretations about what it means to be Christian, and probably some more, are still among us. And so, amidst all the uproar in Muslim countries over the accusations that U.S. interrogators had flushed the Koran down a toilet, the pastor of a Baptist church in North Carolina this week refused to take down a sign posted in the front of his church which reads: "The Koran needs to be flushed." Said the pastor in his own defense, "I don't hate Muslims, I just hate their false doctrines."

Sometimes you read the New Testament and wonder just how Jesus and the early church could have ever survived for several hundred years without doctrines to nail down “truth.” But, they seemed to do just fine. I know of a girl who’d been hired to work as a counselor at a church camp. She’d filled out the application honestly, and written honestly there about her understanding of and relationship to God. But, when during the training it was learned that she hadn’t “accepted Jesus Christ as her personal savior”, she was summarily dismissed.

Apparently the Christian who dismissed her is unfamiliar with the story in Mark’s gospel of when the disciples stop a man from doing good in Jesus’ name because he wasn’t part of their group, wasn’t a follower. Jesus response upon hearing of what his disciples had done was to reprimand them. “Don’t stop him!” “Anyone who is not against us, is for us.” But, apparently according to this Christian’s understanding, if a person hasn’t accepted Jesus Christ as their “personal savior”, if they aren’t a professing Christian, then they are “enemies” unfit to do anything good in the name of Jesus.

Doctrines and religious formulas when used to somehow make others less than, and of course then, ourselves elevated are no different from any of the secular means we use to do the same thing. Be it the car we drive, or the salary we make, the color of our skin, where we went to school, or like Damian’s 9 year-old brother, Anthony, using our money to gain us status and privilege, and “things”.

So, how do we become the persons God intends us to be? Not everyone who says “Lord, Lord”, not everyone who’s accepted Jesus Christ as their “personal savior”, not everyone who knows all the “correct” Christian doctrines, not everyone who does all kinds of acts of compassion in Jesus’ name will get into the Kingdom.” Says Jesus, the thing is not to know correct doctrines about God, it’s not even to have had a powerful religious experiences where you’ve met God.

The thing is, over a lifetime to be known by God. Says Jesus to all these people who are listing all the ways they’ve defended the true faith, all their preaching, all their works in Jesus’ name, “I never knew you.” In Peterson’s translation in *The Message*, Jesus says: “These words I speak to you are not incidental additions to your life, homeowner improvements to your standard of living. They are foundational words, words to build a life on.” “If you work these words into your life, you’re like a smart carpenter who built his house on solid rock.” And the words Jesus is referring to here are the ones he’s just been preaching. Words like: Blessed are the poor in spirit, the Kingdom is theirs, Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted, Blessed are meek, the humble who simply know their worth in God’s love: they shall inherit the earth.

Words that concentrate on what God is about doing in the world, words like: why worry about food and clothes and having enough “stuff”, consider the lilies of the field. They don’t work for a living, but God clothes them so beautifully, so God will surely care for you, too!

If you work those words into your life. The funny thing about the Sermon on the Mount is that it begins with and keeps coming back to what God is about doing in the world, in life. It begins and ends with grace. It begins with a God who is always seeking to know and love us, always filling us with God’s spirit and life. What we do always depends on that; seeing that first, and then putting ourselves in line with it. It’s not about “religious stuff”. It’s about being known by God, and that only happens staying in relationship with God, and that happens when you’re trying to see and be where this God of grace is, in real life, in the world.

Brian Stoffregen tells of his son Mike who several years back attended Boys Nation, where he got to meet, shake hands with, and even briefly converse with President Clinton. His son could now say, “I know President Clinton, I shook his hand, I spoke with him.” But, says Stoffregen, he knows that if

they were now to pass on the street, the former president would have no idea who Mike is. President Clinton doesn't know him because they haven't lived their lives in relationship to one another.

How do we become the persons God wants us to be? First of all, let go of that project! That's God's work. Ours is simply to know and to see a God of grace at work in us and in the world. Once we see that we'll live in relationship with God, and God will know us and take care of the rest. That's God's work. I think of little 7 year-old Damian in the movie. That's the God he knows, the God who blesses the poor and the mourning and loves us all. That's the God who converses with him through the saints.

Finally, at the end, he has a vision of and a conversation with his mother. He asks her if she's a saint now. And she says no. And she explains to him that the criteria is quite involved. "And you have to have done a miracle you know," she says. "But," she says, "I'm in the running." And Damian asks, "What was your miracle?" And his mother replies, "Oh, love, don't you know? It was you."

Jesus might have said simply that the words had somehow through the love of his mother, gotten worked into Damian's life. The words had gotten worked into his life, that's all. No right doctrines, no officially sanctioned religious experiences. Rather, just the grace and love of God lived in a heart and a life had made a house on a sure foundation. It had made a life that lives in relationship to that which sustains it from deep within. It had made a life able to sustain others. And so, a life just as God intended it. It's God's work, and God is doing it in all of us, for the sake of the world.

May we have eyes to see. Amen.

