

OUR FIRM FOUNDATION

Ephesians 2: 19-21; Matthew 7: 24-27

Certainly people have been thinking a lot about foundations lately, as the condominium in Surfside, Florida, built on sand, pancaked down to the ground in a horrible accident. In that case, the foundation might have only been part of the issue for a 40-year-old building. But it is a cautionary tale for all of us. Truly in Florida, even our condos and homes have a concrete slab of some sort. No one just builds their house on sand! Maybe they remember Jesus' words. I've seen the construction of our church facility, preserved on 8mm film and now on a DVD. The architect measured the sanctuary to face east, perpendicular to Peninsula Drive. The slab was poured, and concrete blocks started to go up. One interesting fact: our church building is patterned after First Presbyterian of Deland where our Organizing Pastor had served as an Assistant Pastor. The Deland church was made of brick, but as they calculated the costs of construction for Westminster By-The-Sea, brick became too expensive. So they decided to use blocks instead, and paint them white to save costs. Thus, they created our beachside church instead a college town church! The cornerstone is out front, and it is also depicted on our church banner. It says: "Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone." (Ephesians 2:20) Adults understand those words as the spiritual and symbolic foundation, not a physical foundation. Let's see why Paul might have said those words.

Paul was a missionary to Gentiles. Gentiles are non-Jews; they did not have any training in the faith that we think of as important: they didn't know about the first five books of the Bible; the prophets, the wisdom literature, or Jesus. The Jew named Saul had met Jesus on the road to Damascus in a flash of light. He became Paul and instead of persecuting Gentiles he began inviting them to know Jesus. He began

writing to communities he visited, even while the Gospels were barely being written! Paul certainly knew about Jacob's sons- the ones who formed the Twelve Tribes of Israel; and Jesus knew about them too when he described a new covenant with Twelve Apostles. They were all imperfect but important. Paul worked to reach Gentiles who had a mixture of faiths—a kind of Wikipedia of religions—but Paul sought to replace their mixture of beliefs with his grounding in what would be called the Judeo-Christian heritage! One God, not many; and a tapestry of stories from Genesis. Paul taught about the relationships God had with the human race. And he taught our text today: it is this: he called Christ the cornerstone using builder's terms, and then he described the foundation. Even though we sing about *Christ being the sure foundation*, and *Christ the head* and *Christ the cornerstone*. This time Paul says Christ is the *cornerstone*. In 1 Corinthians 12 he says Christ is the *head*. And in 1 Corinthians 3:11 he says Christ lays the foundation. So our hymnwriters are not wrong, they just homogenize all the images that Paul uses! But here, in Ephesians chapter 2, *Paul spells out what—or in this case who—makes up the foundation: it's people; chosen people as we learned last week. God chose people to carry out special tasks, and to spread the gospel, and God still does that! We are symbolically standing on the shoulders of those who have gone before us.* The book of Hebrews calls that the *great cloud of witnesses*. This land we know as America once was made up solely of indigenous people. Except for them, the rest of our forebearers were immigrants, or foreigners. Paul taught the Gentiles about one God and one Savior Jesus. They learned that that they would no longer be called strangers (our Bibles say *aliens*, some Bibles say *foreigners*) “but citizens with the saints, and [now] members of the household of God.” [Ephesians 2:19] Some people of many colors from many nations have not felt warm welcomes from our nation, nor some from churches. Paul demonstrated welcome to people of other nations; Jesus demonstrated welcome to people of other nations; can we welcome such people too?

Lin Manuel Miranda's musical before "Hamilton" is called "In the Heights." In it he described living in Washington Heights, New York and how it was a melting pot of people. Most people who lived there originally came from other places, but as generations settled there and taught their children stories, Washington Heights became their home instead of their original country—or island. The earliest residents taught the newer residents what it was like to be in "America!" Likewise, Paul's faithful Jews and early Christians taught the Gentiles what it was like to believe in Yahweh: God alone, and what it was like to follow Jesus as Savior. The earlier faithful people had to teach Christ to the Gentiles! Sometimes they did it with stories and analogies. Jesus was the classic storyteller—the typical way he taught. So he used illustrations. Jesus said: "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house upon rock." Paul was trying to continue building the spiritual house on rock for the Ephesians—on the teachings of elders who established the house-church there. He said the foundation is "apostles and prophets." *The foundation is human!* The church is not a building as much as it is people, bound together honoring the Lord! Even now, we count on earlier teachers—even our own early Christian teachers—to help give us the foundation to share with others. I have continuing concerns for the Gentiles of today- that is, people who are self-taught or who cherry pick religious concepts from internet orchards of faith. In Paul's day, Gentiles had various beliefs in gods and superstitions. They let those beliefs guide their lives. They bought icons and statues of many gods, hoping they would bring rain or sun, or a child or a husband or a wife or something else they wanted. In a similar fashion, many in our day are not taught by classically trained church leaders; they glean their knowledge from conversations with others, and from Wikipedia, and from other internet sources. Some follow horoscopes diligently and some are very superstitious.

As a group, we identify many of those people as the “Nones and Dones,” meaning the first group has little or no church experience, and the second group is done with church. So they are adrift in a sea of mixed believes. Getting back to Paul’s words about the foundation with Christ as the corner, *it is up to us—those who have been schooled in the faith from the Bible—to pass on the foundational teachings to the newer people who come to Jesus as seekers.* In Paul’s day the seekers were Gentiles; in our day, they are the curious, the inquisitive, those who are tired of bobbing like a cork on the sea of internet searches for religious information. They want to know truth that can set them free! And if they come to us, or other churches with sure foundations as described by Paul, we are tasked with telling them. Ephesus had a huge statue of the emperor in the harbor of their city, and they had shrines to many gods in Ephesus. Gentiles visited the shrines regularly, picking up souvenirs said to have protective powers. What thanks we offer to the great missionary Paul who brought his Christian friends to help establish a church, offering truth and a firm foundation based on the apostles and the prophets! Referring to Jesus, Paul says in verse 21: “In him the whole structure is joined together into a holy temple of the Lord.” And, as we learned from Jesus, building on rock is so much better than building on sand. I do not think it was an accident that a few verses later, Jesus took his disciples to a place in Caesarea Philippi near what is called “the Gates of Hell,” a deep cave where sulfur gasses spewed constantly. There, away from the suspicious troops of Herod Antipas, he asked his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” And after a few responses, Jesus got to his real question: “But who do *you* say that I am? And Simon said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus said “Blessed are you Simon, son of Jonah! ... I now call you Peter—[which means rock] and on that rock I will build my church [and here I imagine he points to the cave, saying] “and the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.” [Matthew 16] The

foundation here was Peter, but more importantly, it was also the declaration he made: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.”

As people approach our sanctuary, they may notice the cornerstone out front with the words from Ephesians 2:20: “Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone.” Then as they enter the vestibule that we call a narthex, they may notice the sign above the entranceway that reads, “Friend you enter this church not as a stranger, but as a guest of God. Come then with joy in your heart and thanks upon your lips, and offer Him today your love and service.” Can people who enter, or join us online, tell what we believe by what we sing, and what we say? Can they tell that we are grounded in the declaration that Peter offered: “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God?” People who learn spirituality from many sources may be looking for the Lord on which our hope is based. Our next hymn perhaps best says what I would say: *My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame but wholly lean on Jesus' name. On Christ the solid rock I stand; all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.*

Don't trust your soul to sinking sand. Trust your soul to the sure foundation.

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