

Sermon at Leaside: Like a Rock
On June 1, 2008
based on Matthew 7: 21 – 29

I love to go to the beach.

As a kid, one of my favourite activities was making sand castles.

I spent countless summer hours as a child, dreaming of the sand castles I would make, figuring out how to make towers and ramps and flags and courtyards.

One summer I took a whole bag of little army men with me to the cottage so that we could have castle wars on the sand.

Nowadays I'd never let my own kids do that!

The worst thing about sand castles is how ephemeral they are.

You build them one day, and by the next day, they are gone.

Wind, waves or even the violence of strangers, can completely undo the work of a whole day, and quickly crush the dreams of summer nights in anticipation and preparation.

Even so, the sand castles were a unique if fragile pleasure.

Just because they don't last, doesn't mean we're going to stop making them.

My own house is built on a cement block foundation.

It's now about 60 years old, and a couple of years ago, a leak in the back corner of the house soon turned into a torrent of water one night when we had a rainstorm in the middle of December.

The ground hadn't frozen enough and the cracks in the foundation just opened up and let in the water.

Sometimes even the most secure foundations need to be tended. Had I been vigilant, I would have noticed the developing cracks.

Had I been paying attention to the slow persistent leaks in the house, I would perhaps not have waited for the Niagara Falls event to occur before taking action.

Our spiritual lives become more and more important the older we get. Somehow, (and this is very unfortunate) spiritual stuff seems wasted, like youth, on the young. It's only when we cross certain milestones or thresholds, that we realize how deeply grounded life can be, how living close to the source of life and love adds such a pleasurable dimension to our lives, how everyday events take on new meaning when imbued with the added value of faith in the larger picture, trust in the greater being. There's a lot of literature about how spiritually aware kids are. I had a young boy in Aurora who could see balls of light everywhere.

Something happens to us as we mature, grow up, and begin to live out our working years' life. We put away our dreams. We place spiritual awareness on the side burner. We learn to run hard and fast, because everyone else is. As if someone is chasing us.

I don't know about you, but it occurs to me from time to time that if I want to be the hero of my own life (which I do), and not just some kind of passive participant in all that God may put in my life, than I have to take some responsibility for the grounding I DO have. I have to take responsibility for the faith, the trust, the deep sense of belonging that I crave and need and want. While I believe God gives these things to us, (abundantly, Jesus tells us repeatedly), I know that I'm less likely to receive or appreciate these gifts when I'm running my life literally at a breakneck pace.

I don't suppose there's a drive-up window anywhere that's handing out peace, contentment, joy, mercy, forgiveness, and deep connection. Drive-up windows are made for speed, convenience, and as little human interaction as possible. We've created this kind of world for ourselves. Is it any wonder that we worry about our children's spiritual inheritance?

We've created a culture where the most important things in life are commodities. Where even air rights are sold. Where time becomes the most scarce and most prized commodity, even though, we all have the same amount of time each day. We've drifted off our footings, or, like my own house, we've let the foundations become cracked, and they need tending. They need vigilance. They need attention.

You know, if I wanted to build a new house, I would not just have a contractor come in and lay down a perfectly smooth slab of concrete, would I? By the same token, those who construct highways, know that it is the layering of sand and gravel that makes the base secure. If you just laid asphalt on top of open ground, it would be cracked and pot-holed in a matter of weeks.

Isn't it true that relationships don't just happen instantly? Does anyone truly fall in love, and stay madly in love for the rest of their lives with one person? Love has seasons, and we deepen and change in our relationships with the changing of seasons. Children don't pop out of the womb fully formed, though sometimes we wonder if it wouldn't be a little easier. We build a foundation for them, we nurture them, we feed them food for body, mind, and spirit.

I have a friend who lives in northern Ontario, an older woman, now long retired from her work here in Toronto.

She is very wise on many levels, having come through many toils and snares in the course of her long life. Many times I've heard her say the secret is to have a ROCK, something solid underfoot, something you can depend on in good times and bad. She should know. She's lost all her kids to one thing or another, an accident, cancer, and one lives far from her in a home for severely disabled adult children. Yet Eileen stays grounded. Peaceful, coping, always able to find the blessing of the day even on the worst days. On her horse farm up north, there are many outcroppings of rock. Old worn stone from before the ice ages. The rock, she says, keeps the soil from blowing away, keeps the ground from becoming hard baked clay.

When she needs comfort, or hope, or security or peace,
Eileen goes out to a place where there is a large flat piece of rock.
She lays down on it, and rests.

Sometimes, she goes to sleep and lets the rock hold her.

Other times, she closes her eyes and can feel the turning of the earth, the movement of all the turmoil and chaos of the world swirling around her.
But she herself is firmly grounded.

I said to her once, I live in the city and we don't have big rocks like the one you describe.

Scolding me gently, she said, I'm not talking about a real rock, John.

I'm talking about that which you are most anchored to, the rock you are most held by, the truth of your life that guides you and guards you in all that you do.

If a bee is caught outside in a storm and can't find its way back to the hive, it will lean up against the wind-facing side of the rock.

It's safer there.

And when the storm passes, it can find its way home, without having used all its energy for the battle with the storm.

Wafer-thin.

Wafer-thin is how I might describe the grounding of many in our culture today.

Wafer-thin underpinnings.

When we are one paycheque away from bankruptcy,
or one day away from complete exhaustion.

Or when we are ready to give in or give up, acquiesce, or strike back,
if our grounding is thinly constructed,

and if we can't find our footing on something solid,

we are bound to make mistakes,

to come unglued,

to be thrown off-balance.

Even rock solid footings crack open sometimes.

The Sermon on the Mount which we have now finished today teaches us life lessons about living in the here and now. The teachings of Jesus are for today and are not locked up in the historical narrative of the Bible. They still apply.

Taken as a whole, these 3 chapters from Matthew provide a window into God. They offer us a vision of how we CAN live, once our lives are transformed by the indwelling spirit of God.

The “indwelling” is important. God dwells within us.
God makes her HOME inside us.
Like a mother bird searching for a nesting place, God searches our hearts for the right place to nest.

But it's much deeper than that.
When we ground ourselves in the teachings of Jesus, we see him.
When we bless the poor, when we walk the extra mile, when we consider the lilies, when we seek the kingdom FIRST in all that we do and say, Jesus appears. It is seeing Jesus, and knowing that his Spirit lives deep within the chasms of our spiritual essence, deep within the fiber of our moral and ethical being, that anchors us. We used to sing a song with the verse: we have an anchor that keeps the soul, steadfast and sure while the billows roll: fastened to the rock that cannot move. Grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love.

Recently I saw a chart that some young people had drawn of the way they spent their time in a typical week. The chart divided up a whole week into 30 minute segments. There are 336 half-hour segments in a week of our lives.

The kids claimed 84 of those segments for TV and video games. (25%)
This was the largest segment outside of sleeping.

Eating was next, at 42 segments. Family time ranged from one segment to 35, averaging at 14.

Faith development and spiritual nurture: one segment, on average.

At the University of Nebraska, a different study showed that participants who meditated, prayed, or even listened to spiritual music for only 30 minutes a day, had 30% less stomach problems than those in the control group.

A half-hour can make a big difference. A half-hour of spiritual practice can make us well. What are we teaching our kids? How much time per day?

It was December 30 and 31st, the weather had turned cold and bitter. The waterproofing company showed up anyway. They dug up the earth alongside the house, exposing the cracked foundation. They sealed the cracks, placed new tile along the ground, and affixed a thick rubber membrane to the wall. The house settled into its newfound health. Those who lived there, slept the sleep of a thousand nights.

This is the place where we hear Jesus speak, we see him and know him, by the Spirit God has placed in our hearts. This indwelling, deep in the core of our heart, deep in the core of our being,
keeps us.
Holds us.
Grounds us.