

“Should We Panic?”

Psalms 89:12-17; Isaiah 28:14-18;
1 Cor 3:9-17; Matthew 7:13-29

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As we come to the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, there's a saying about what preachers sometimes do at the end, and you might say it's to “bring things home.” Jesus is beginning to bring it home.

My tendency would be to step through this scripture a piece at a time, but then we might be here for the rest of the afternoon. So let me just note that there's a central piece to this final scripture we read today, and it comes when Jesus says, “Do the will of my Father.” It's that word, *do*. A little later he says, “If you hear these words and act on them...” I wouldn't think of “do” and “act” as the same verb, because in English they're not, but in Greek, those are the same verb. Do the will of the Father; act on these words.

If you look this word up in a lexicon, there are about a dozen meanings behind it. It can be “make,” it can be “do,” it can be “celebrate,” it can be “create,” it can be “work,” it can be “act.” It's describing our creative human ability to do things. Since it's a verb, it's the action of our lives—the doing, the creating, the making. This one word describes the creative ability we have, and when it gets put into action. It's a verb; it's about the action. So that's what Jesus is talking about in this final passage, about our creative ability put into action.

Several times, he has suggested that there are times when we have trouble with his guidance. As we have creative ability that we can put into action, we have to make some choices. That is, perhaps, what it's all about – making the choices. He suggests that it's not always simple. There's a broad, easy road for us to take, but it doesn't lead to life. He's encouraging us to recognize that the road is narrow and “hard” or “restricted”. I think about those city streets where they put roundabouts in the middle of intersections so you can't go through quickly, or they put speed bumps to slow things down. I almost hear Jesus saying, “Don't expect to rush through life. Don't expect to rush past without it taking some exertion to live life, to follow Christ. And there are going to be lots of folks along the way who are going to suggest that you can listen to them.”

The funny thing is that there are two kinds of prophets. There are those who claim to be “prophets” as in “speaking for God,” when they are only thinking about “profits” that they can get. So Jesus is asking us to think about which prophet/profit is the motive. We can see that motive, he says, by the fruit. We know, when we see an apple, where it comes from. We know, when we see some grapes, where they come from. When Jesus says we will know them by their fruits, it makes me think about knowing where it comes from. It makes me think about Paul talking about the Fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. It is interesting how many times the Bible uses fruits as examples, and it gives us an idea

about finding our way. Are we on the right path? Do we see those fruits? The hard part about it is when I begin to think about myself. Do I see those fruits expressed?

It's fascinating to me that as Jesus invites us to use our creative ability and to put it into action, that there's a narrow road, that it's not always without effort. Maybe some patience is needed so that we're not going through life at a breakneck pace, and then maybe we will have time to see who needs what we can give, and we can take time to pray, take time to make room for God in our lives.

But as he does that, he suggests that even those who recognize what God is about, who recognize that God is important, can still go off track. That's one of the things that really strikes home to me. You can say, "Lord, Lord." You can say, "Look at how I've talked for you. Look at the deeds of power I've done." It seems that Jesus isn't so interested in all that stuff. He says, "I don't know you." Remember way back when we started, he said, "Your righteousness needs to be way better than the Scribes and the Pharisees," and I suggested that's about having right relationship. He's coming back to that again, I think, and saying it's about who you know.

We have the saying "it's not what you know, it's who you know." This is a twist on that, but I think it's true. It's not just what you do, it's that the deeds of power in our lives are what define us in relationship to God. All along Jesus has talked about humility, about not looking for the accolades, but being in relationship with God. So once again he says, "It's about me knowing you and you knowing me."

One of the ways I think about that is that I have to move beyond knowing about things to a knowing of a heart. It is not just knowing about things, it becomes part of who I am. It's not knowing a set of facts, it's knowing about relationship. It's a knowing that involves caring about what the other cares about. Jesus says to do the will of the father, do the purpose of God. He tells us things like, "This new commandment I give you: love one another even as I have loved you," and, of course, the greatest commandment of "love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself."

How do we let our relationship with Christ become who we are about, so that we care about what God cares about and let that shape how our creative ability is put into action? I think that's what Jesus is saying. When our hearts, our being, become that which is in relationship with Christ, when we care about what God cares about, then we begin to put it into action and that action reflects who we are because we follow Christ. That's what Jesus says at the end. "Do you hear these words and put them into action?" If you do, then you are creating a foundation on rock that won't be moved. You will be led into life, and even when the floods of life come, you will be able to keep going, you will be able to stand firm. When I think of a flood, I think of water, but I also think about a crowd. Sometimes you have to stand firm and go the opposite direction the crowd is going.

We build a foundation when we allow Christ to be in us and with us, to change our hearts, to change the very nature of who we are. Then we can hear, do. That's Christ's invitation. "Build on these teachings, build on this relationship that I'm giving you. Don't build on the sands that will wash away." Like a good teacher, he ends with a challenge: build on the rock.

We could stop there, but the passage has just a little extra. The people heard him teaching with authority. As Jesus finishes, the people hearing him recognized he taught as one with authority, one who could elucidate, could tell the truth. It feels like, when Matthew puts that in there, he is asking the readers one last question: is this just a nice sermon that we've just heard with some nice ideas about how we might live our lives, or is this someone speaking with authority, speaking truth into our lives, offering us life? Is Jesus that authority for us? It seems to be Matthew's final question for us. Amen.

Let's pray:

Gracious God, we thank you for this entire sermon, what we often call the Sermon on the Mount. We thank you again for the way Jesus teaches us, invites us, challenges us to use our creative ability and put it into action to do your work, to express your purposes in our lives, to do your will. Let us truly hear Jesus' word to us and build on that foundation, that we may know the fullness of life. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.