

Anniversary Sunday 2023

Meta

Location: Apostles Anglican Church

Date: August 13, 2023

Readings

Haggai 2.1-8

Psalm 84

1 Corinthians 3.1-17

Matthew 7.13-25

Opening

Today is the 17th anniversary of our church's founding, and in the course of those seventeen years, we've all experienced several occasions when we've come to worship with mixed emotions. As I mentioned earlier, we come with heavy hearts, we grieve Rachel's departure from Apostles. We need space to process this change and I'll address that further during our announcements.

And even though we're processing a significant change here, it's still fitting that we turn our hearts to the Lord's faithfulness at Apostles these past 17 years. We've celebrated our anniversary each year in the parish, but it was only last year that we instituted this new custom of having a combined service on the occasion of Apostles' anniversary. For the anniversary of a church gives us an occasion to pause in the midst of all happenings and remember God's presence, his goodness, his faithfulness. It's also an occasion to give thanks for what he's doing and what he will do in days ahead.

This church was founded on courageous faith; on trusting God with things we can't see, trusting him with an unknown future.

This church was founded on prayer—leaders and especially matriarchs, seeking the face of God, listening for his voice to guide us according to his will.

The church has always embraced the gift and importance of beauty. From just about day 1, the founding families and individuals of our parish had the benefit of worshipping in this Nave. Never forget, y'all, that our good Baptist brothers and sisters owned this building first and Baptists made it possible for these Anglicans to grow a church in the Kingdom. And now we have the opportunity to beautify our Nave even further. Work on new flooring, seating, and lighting will begin very soon. We'll begin worshipping downstairs on September 3 so that we can make our Nave even more suitable for sacramental worship.

This church was founded on the holiness of the Word of God. Here our newcomers will be getting a preview of what we'll share when the Discovery Course begins (next week), but it's important for all of

us to remember that this parish placed the authority, the trustworthiness, and the power of God's Holy Word at the very center of our common life together.

And we have no better summary of the Gospel—and we might even say scriptural teaching as a whole—than Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We heard the final section of the Sermon on the Mount a moment ago, and I want to zoom on an even smaller selection there, meditating on the final segment of Jesus' sermon, the story of the house built on the rock.

This Faith is Solid

It's only been within the past 3 years or so, reading the Gospel of Matthew that it struck me that the power of this story comes from its placement in the Sermon as a whole. For good reason, I believe, Jesus held off telling the story of the wise man building his house on the rock until the very end of his sermon. It's a powerful image, the house built on the rock, withstanding the storm, but the story would have lost its full force had it been told in the middle. Jesus saved it for the end, to tie everything together. Because this brief story isn't just a nice illustration, a nice metaphor. *The rock is a figure for the entire teaching in the Sermon on the Mount they have just heard.*

'Everyone who hears *these words of mine* and does them will be like a wise man...'

It's another way of saying: the Beatitudes—they're solid all the way down. It may sound weak, ineffective, and foolish that the poor in spirit will inherit the kingdom of heaven; that those who mourn will be comforted; that the meek will inherit the earth; that peacemakers will be called children of God, but it's solid all the way down and all the way through. When you repent from angry thoughts; when you cleanse your eye from lust; when you pray and fast only to be seen by the Lord; when you seek first the kingdom of God and release your worries to the Lord—you're standing on the rock. Even if it doesn't feel stable, trust Me—it's solid all the way down, all the way through.

When you take the beam out of your own eye to keep from judging another; when you build your life doing for others what you wish for yourself; when you love your enemies; when you lay up your treasure in heaven, you're standing on the rock and you will not be shaken. Anchoring your life on these teachings and the Lord Himself who taught them, you will endure and withstand all things, no matter what storms may come.

Let us note well, brothers and sisters, that the wise man of our concluding parable was only called to build; he was not called to predict the weather. He's a builder, not a weatherman. Too often we try to anticipate or protect ourselves from an uncertain future. The builder can't control future events; he can only build with wisdom—wisdom that knows that storms *will* come; that they cannot be avoided in this life. But the wise man builds so that, no matter the strength of the storm—small, medium, or large—his structure has footings strong enough to endure whatever flood levels or winds may come. We cannot put our energy into trying to anticipate what circumstances may or may not come—we trust the book of our days in the Lord's hands; our task is to build our life on the solid teachings Jesus proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount. It's solid all the way down, all the way through. Being anchored here, we will remain strongly rooted and grounded, enduring all things. It's a powerful witness of the Gospel.

The Enduring Church

While we were away from Apostles in the month of July, we had the great gift of traveling to England where I was able to reunite with friends from the beginning of my years in pastoral ministry back in 2004. We saw friends in the North East where I lived and served, but much of our time was spent in Essex, staying with our dear soul friends, Andy and Alice Smith. Andy is the rector and Alice serves as parish deacon, both of them faithful Gospel pastors in Hutton Parish, which comprises two Anglican churches, St Peter's Church and All Saints Church.

On our last full day in England, I took a long walk by myself to the older of the two churches, All Saints Church. I wanted to take advantage of the public footpaths while in England—something I wish we had here in the States!

I had already seen the beautiful interior of All Saints Church, a church that dates back to the 1300s. But on this occasion, I wanted to return by myself; to sit outside and listen for the voice of the Lord in that silent and sacred place. There I sat in the woodland churchyard, dozens of grave markers around, a quiet rustling wheat field just beyond the hedge. I don't seek grand revelations in silence, only what the Lord wishes to speak. And while I listened in the quiet, the Spirit gripped me with the truth that this church has endured since it opened in 1325. Bells have rung from this bell tower for centuries, summoning Anglicans to prayer, to gather for holy communion. Bells have rung out on countless Easter mornings that Christ is risen. *I stood in awe and thanksgiving of the power of grace enduring in ordinary things, year after year, decade after decade, century after century.* It was only 23 years after its opening that this parish endured their own pandemic, the Black Death, yet the parish endured. From the Black Death to the English Reformation to the Victorian Era to the Bombing of Britain in World War II all the way to King Charles Coronation Day, All Saints Church has been there. It's the power of being there. From generation to generation, mothers and fathers have brought their children to be baptized here. Bishops confirmed sons and daughters in their faith here. Rector after rector proclaimed the Gospel here. Local saints have been committed to the Lord and to holy ground here while they await the Great Resurrection Day. And all around the world beyond Hutton—kings and queens have been crowned and died; wars have begun and ended; and yet this little church endures. It's present; it's there. You've never heard of All Saints Church, Hutton, until today and not many outside of Essex have either. That's not what matters. What matters is that this church has been present and has endured in and for Hutton. What matters is that the church endures and worships and serves in the place where God placed it, year after year after year.

May it be so for Apostles Anglican Church where he has placed us in Knoxville. That our hearts would be so devoted to this city we love. That we would so embrace the whole Gospel Jesus proclaimed in his Sermon on the Mount, building our lives on the rock solid foundation that is his Kingdom Way.

And may our abiding witness be the power of grace enduring in ordinary things—that we baptize our daughters and sons and new believers in Jesus Christ; that we serve our neighbors and the poor whom God loves with great affection; that we sing hymns in days of joy and days of sorrow, praising the God who has redeemed us; that we would consecrate ordinary bread and ordinary wine to become the Body and Blood of Jesus, grace which saves to the uttermost.

Our city has had a difficult week. Our parish has had a difficult week of sudden change. But this parish is built on the rock that is Christ Jesus. We have the power of God working through ordinary things to comfort us, to guide us, to lead us onward into the work he has called us to do. For he has called us to be anchored in Him—not just anyway, but here. To endure and thrive for his sake and for his glory.

Year after year, generation after generation, to gather in this place and then go from this place and be witnesses of his Gospel in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.