

**THE NEW COMMUNITY: ORDER ACTIONS ACCORDING TO PURPOSE**  
**MATTHEW 7:21-29**  
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We've been talking these weeks about the new community...the post Easter church, the church born 2,000 years ago at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit empowered the first followers of Jesus.

There aren't many 2,000 year old institutions. Retail stores and restaurants display the year of their founding on their stationary or windows. Age conveys credibility, instills confidence.

Westminster is 151 years old, the church of Jesus Christ is older. You can't be around that long if you aren't built on something solid. That's the point of Jesus' story today.

The parable Jesus tells comes at the end of his Sermon on the Mount, his famous sermon retelling God's law for the church. "I came not to add to or take away from the law but to fulfill it," he said before preaching that sermon.

Then at the end of the sermon he tells this parable of the two houses, one built on rock, one on sand – actually Jesus was probably referring to what is called the wadi or the dry river beds of Palestine. The wadi is a portion of the riverbed that is dry most of the year until spring rains fill it to the top of its banks.

The wadi is an easy place to build a house because the earth is soft. You can sink supports and footers easily into the sandy soil. But as soon as the wadi fills with water it washes away like the dirt on your car going through Delta Sonic. Gone. A house built on the wadi goes, too.

Jesus' parable is about the construction of a house but really he's talking about building a life. It makes all the difference what we build our lives and families and churches on.

One of Matthew's favorite themes is that there are two kinds of people – those who build on solid ground and those who build on sand. Jesus uses many metaphors to depict these two approaches to life – the tree that bears fruit and the one that doesn't; the narrow gate and the hard way that lead to life and the wide gate and the spacious way that lead to destruction.

At the end of Matthew, in the famous judgment scene, Jesus divides between these two kinds of people like a shepherd dividing the sheep and the goats. Those who build on solid ground enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew gives us the unvarnished truth. In every age, the storms and turbulence of life wash away those whose lives are not built on solid ground. Witness recent CEO scandals.

We do have a choice what we build our lives and our church on. The principles and purposes of God or the values of society. Those who choose the later won't have much left after the first cloudburst of marriage or middle age.

The missional church, the new community we have been talking about these weeks builds its life and orders its actions according to the principles and purposes of God.

Now I want to come back to this theme of building our lives and ordering our actions on solid ground. But I want to take a moment to note that if we claim that building a life on Christ is surer ground than other foundations we go against the grain of our culture.

Almost two hundred years ago Alexis de Tocqueville, a visitor to America from France recorded his observations. De Tocqueville said some interesting things that still apply to the character of the American people and nation.

He said Americans are democratized to the extent that we believe that everyone is morally equal, that no one is better than anybody else.

Fast forward to the 1980s. In a 1987 book that rocked the academic world entitled, *The Closing of the American Mind*, Alan Bloom said something similar. He said the notion that everyone is morally equal denies greatness. It wants everyone to feel comfortable in his own skin without having to suffer the consequences.

We can see where this has led us as a society. If everyone is morally equal the individual is primary. You can think or do whatever you want to think or do as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else. Individual rights, says Alan Bloom, have superseded communal health and well being.

The result is that communal institutions, churches and schools, for example, have taken a back seat to the individual. Far be it from us, many churches and schools say, to teach anyone what we think constitutes or leads to a grounded life. For if we do, we may be violating their right to believe whatever they want to believe.

I learned recently of a student who did a graduate thesis on college and university mission statements and statements of purpose.

He noted that well into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century college mission statements claimed that the purpose of the college was to instill wisdom in its students and to build character. By the 1950s, colleges talked less about their ability to inculcate wisdom and more about knowledge.

By the 1980s, colleges never mentioned so noble a purpose as wisdom and now talked about information. He predicted the day would come when colleges would boast merely, "Come and study with us, and we'll give you a lot of data."

And here is a profound irony. At a time when we have more people seeking wisdom and truth for living many churches – not to mention other institutions like schools and colleges – choose to remain silent about the wisdom and truth they do have.

I am making a case for being a purpose-focused church this morning. I am saying that it matters what we build our individual lives and our congregational life on. There are solid purposes – like the teachings of Jesus and there are purposes that amount to building our lives on the sands of the wadi like the notion that everyone is morally equal or believe whatever you want to believe if it works for you.

If we are to be people who live according to the purposes of Jesus we will be going against the grain of society. We will say to ourselves and to others, "every belief system isn't the same." If you intend to live a Christ like life then Christ's purposes are above all others for you and me.

Aristotle used an analogy for learning how to become a morally solid person. It is like learning how to ride a horse he said. You can't learn equestrianism by reading books about it. You have to actually get on the horse.

You have to submit to the wisdom of a master, someone who has given their lives to equestrianism. The master helps you get to know a horse, discern the temperaments of horses, how to use the reins, find the right horse for your temperament. Becoming a moral person is like that, said Aristotle.

A student talked about what happened when she signed on to study with a famous violinist. First lesson she hardly touched the violin. The teacher examined her hands, pulled on her arms, told her things like, "From now on, I own you. I will tell you what to eat, how to sleep." All she wanted was to learn to play the violin. But she wanted to learn from the best.

If we aspire to become the best society, the best people, the best congregation, there is no way around the hard, time consuming, risky and laborious task of founding our lives on the solid ground of God's purposes and submitting to the teachings of Jesus the master.

Let me bring this back to Westminster. You might say that the mission of all churches is the same: go and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. This is Jesus' great commission to his followers at the end of the Gospel of Matthew.

But the purpose of a church is how a local congregation interprets that commission for its own community. In our case a struggling urban community.

Our mission statement says Jesus' answer to the lawyer that the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves best describes Westminster's mission.

We are people in relationship with God and one another serving our community the statement says. But I'd like to raise the bar a little bit.

What would happen if we were to teach and equip not just ourselves but others how to love the Lord with heart, mind, soul, and strength and neighbor as well. What if we saw ourselves as being in relationship not just with ourselves but with others in this community whose names we do not yet know, with those who may be building their lives on sand, with those who are seeking deeper truth.

I'm not saying we haven't been helpful to some folks or that we've been closed to seekers just that we haven't reached out to them as best we might.

I think of all the young families in our weekday early childhood programs, the commuters and workers in this neighborhood who drive or walk by our front doors every day, all those elderly or lower income people who live in the apartments surrounding this church.

I'm not sure we've given our best to telling them about what we've experienced is the solid ground of Jesus Christ to build a life on.

Now let me come back to ordering actions according to God's purposes. Elders, deacons, committee members and staff here at church, parents raising children, individuals in their personal lives do well to regularly ask some tough questions.

Here at church questions like: How does this activity or event lead to the accomplishment of our purpose or mission? Is this activity designed for just members or to connect with those who are not yet members? And perhaps the one that would lead to the elimination of some of our programs: If we were not already doing this activity, would we initiate it today, on the basis of our mission and purpose?

Churches, families, individuals who don't know their core purpose, don't regularly check their actions according to that purpose, and don't let go of whatever does not serve their purpose run the risk of building their lives on shifting sands of what is popular, easy and irrelevant.

Churches, families and individuals that order their lives according to the principles and purposes of God engage the hard, time consuming, risky and laborious task of learning from the master, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith – Jesus Christ.

And they build their lives on solid ground. Amen.