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There is a paradox at the core of our faith which is this: in times of persecution and struggle individual believers and the church often thrive; in times of prosperity and comfort believers and the church often become spiritually flabby.

Evidence of this paradox is easy to find. In the days of dark repression in the former Soviet Union and China, underground Christian communities popped up everywhere. In the years before abolition, Christianity took root in the soil of American slavery and produced a noble and resplendent faith.

But the opposite is also true and seen no where more clearly than the prophetic tradition which is God's voice of indignation when Israel is at the peak of her prosperity. Amos is scathing in his condemnation of the spiritual lethargy and decadence of the rich at the expense of the poor.

There are no shortages of contemporary examples of what stirred the ire of the prophets. I am thinking of one mega-church in Houston. The pastor's message is simple which is part of its power. If you become a Christian, he says, your life will go much, much better. Then the deceitful lie: God wants you to succeed as this culture defines success.

"Stop thinking negative thoughts," "choose to be happy," "adopt the right attitude." In other words the key to your life is you and the benchmark of God's blessing is material reward. This is not advice we find on the lips of Jesus.

Especially, the Jesus today who warns, "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven. I will say to them, 'I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.' Yet, they will say, 'did we not prophesy in your name, cast out demons and do great works?'"

Suddenly sweet Jesus who forgives our sins and lays down his life is the voice of judgment and we find ourselves in a family intervention with a Savior who looks a lot like an angry relative.

We might feign surprise, for Jesus did ask us to call him Lord and preach truth and do great deeds in his name. Clearly the writer of this gospel is not taking aim here at Roman oppressors or the Sanhedran.

Matthew knew about the human tendency to comfort and spiritual flabbiness and therefore that judgment must begin within the body of Christ. My guess is because he is writing to the first circle of Jesus' followers, in Jerusalem, he already sensed self-inflating privilege and entitlement. Thus, he draws a line in the theological sand; a line that has challenged spiritual presumption and immunity from change ever since.

"Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The storm came and beat upon the house but it did not fall."

On this Sunday recognizing graduating seniors and conducting our annual meeting I'd like to consider what Jesus says marks us as his followers.

This mark or credo can guide a young person heading to college or an urban congregation in a struggling city.

Let me just say that by “credo” I mean a belief or principle which you can state in your own words and that has the ring of life experience.

I do not mean an official system of theological belief. Necessary as they are for the constructing biblically grounded theology the problem with towering theological systems is they are removed from the ‘ground zero’ of daily life.

If what you need is a readily available credo as you face some crossroads of decision trying to apply St. Augustine’s doctrine of human nature or Paul Tillich’s Christology to your dilemma would be like trying to drive to the grocery store in a 747.

I mention the personal credo because finding a credo in my teenage years is where the rubber met the road for me. Before that time my faith was a fragmented recollection of impersonal doctrines that meant very little. But then someone challenged me to reach out and respond to the God of my understanding.

Sometimes giving yourself that kind of permission takes a crisis and feels like you’ve got little more than a toe-hold on the side of a treacherous cliff.

But I am convinced that most of those who responded to Jesus found themselves in such situations. His parables and healing ignited the process of trust, risk and deepening contact with God.

“Everyone who hears my words and acts on them and does the will of my father will enter the kingdom of heaven. She will be like one who builds her house on a rock, able to withstand the storms of life.” I have talked with enough members of this congregation and had enough of my own personal journey to know those are words of life.

‘Listen to Jesus and try your best to do what he tells you to do,’ one member told me recently, “You know I wish I had more than that. I wish I had a really detailed fortune cookie or dependable crystal ball or some explicit road map to tell me exactly where I am going to end up but I don’t.”

“I’m traveling by little steps, but I can tell it is working because my life is different. I have a sense of confidence that I’ve never had – even when I thought I had so much. And though I get anxious from time to time I know that this path is leading me in the right direction.”

At the heart of the paradox of struggle and faith is that kind of trust and obedience. If we listen to Jesus and do what he says not only will we have to let go of our obsession with controlling outcomes and other people but we won’t be far from doing God’s will either.

That simple? Yes, but only if we remember that Jesus’ words today come at the end of his Sermon on the Mount which is for all intents and purposes a “Christian Torah”; and if we are listening to and acting on his words that cover everything from human relations to stewardship to prayer we have our work cut out for us.

It is natural for humans to want more than that. The serpent in the Garden is so often the voice in our own heads that convinces us we hunger for and deserve more than

paltry obedience to Jesus. We have insatiable appetites for knowledge, for power. And we want only a few of the right material things, a modicum more of worldly success which would make our lives so much better. What could be wrong with satisfying these appetites?

But Jesus preaches to a different appetite. Jesus preaches to our hunger for a closer relationship to God; he preaches to our hunger for deep peace in the midst of a harrowing world. He preaches to our hunger to quench loneliness with intimacy and human community.

The message of the Gospel today is that the seeds of our faith are planted in struggle: the struggle of Jesus against the principalities and powers; the struggle of the church in times of persecution—represented in this glorious arch of the martyrs; the seeds of faith are planted in our struggle as a one-time patrician church trying to let go of stultifying presumption that depends on a tradition of outdated bias, personal privilege and image that have no place in a Christian community.

And I'd be very surprised if there weren't several of us here today who aren't facing personal struggles at some crossroads in life—whether a young adult trying to figure out how to handle the new responsibilities of independence and college or others of us in the midst of some life change.

Let me be blunt, I've been pastor of this congregation for ten years. We've made significant strides toward transformation and there are signs of it all around. But we are being called to let the change go deeper and burn away all of the false supports that keep us from simple obedience to Jesus Christ.

So we're right where we should be at this conclusion of another church year—struggling, and coming to the table of sacrifice, obedience and new life. Amen